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THE SOFA

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THE SOFA

A MORAL TALE

BY

CRÉBILLON FILS

(Claude Prosper Jolyot)

*Translated with an Introduction
by Bonamy Dobrée*

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INTRODUCTION

By SIR EDMUND GOSSE, C.B., LL.D.

FRENCH LITERATURE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

EVERY generation approaches the history of literature with fresh eyes, revising the judgments of the past and recapitulating its own prejudices. In the course of a hundred and fifty years there have been many changes of critical opinion with regard to the product of the Eighteenth Century. In the heyday of romanticism it was attacked with contemptuous fury as though it had been another Bastille. It was not a period of sensibility or imagination, and when nothing else than lyric passion was valued in literature, the masters of so calm an epoch were left out in the cold. We have entered into a new phase, and each decade which divides us from the Revolution offers us opportunities of contemplating the Eighteenth Century in better perspective. We see a period in some respects unique in human history; following an age of force which had hardened into austerity, preceding an age of revolt when all the ideals and traditions were broken, the Eighteenth Century appears like a strip of meadowland between cliffs and the sea. It is, to pursue the image, a field which is flat and at its edges sandy, but on which there flourishes a profusion of flowers. Across this

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tract there is a marked division ; its upper half is hard and dry, diversified by a few monuments marked with the names of Buffon, Montesquieu, Saint Simon, Voltaire. Through its lower half creeps a river, Rousseau, neither swift nor clear, but spreading prodigal moisture in all directions, and encouraging a tangle of lush growths. This marish of sentimentalities and social contrasts leads us down to the ocean of 1789.

By common consent, Bayle is recognized as the father of the Eighteenth Century, though he hardly entered it. But it was he who started that restless intellectual vitality, often expending itself in mere vivacity, which was its characteristic feature. Bayle was a man who eschewed the dogmatic attitude, to whom everything was a question, who insisted on liberty of the intellectual conscience. Released by the death of Louis XIV from her burden of dogma, France stretched her arms and breathed anew. She changed her fashions, she adopted new formulas, she spoke of "progress," of "liberty," of "tolerance"—unfamiliar things. The earliest exhibition of the new sense in literature was the acceptance of modern aims in writing. The tyranny of the Ancients, which had long been resisted, was finally cast off. Madame Dacier, in her translation of the *Iliad* (1699), took the liberty of changing whatever in Homer she believed would offend French taste. The Abbé Terrasson, charged with erudition, decided after long comparison that Tasso was far superior to Homer as a poet. The first act of the Eighteenth Century was to cut itself off from the discipline of antiquity.

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On the space thus left vacant it began to build its graceful and convenient structures. There was no violent breach between the old style and the new. The poets, such as they were, still were pastoral, but they gave their shepherdesses the tone of polished society, and taught them to sigh with elegance. Wit took the place of passion, because refinement must be cultivated in a purely modern society. To sparkle was the one thing essential. Whatever qualities the authors of a polite age may have, "il faut qu'ils aient de l'esprit, et de l'esprit fin et galant." The Great Age had been sublime, but its majesty had concealed much roughness and commonness. These could hardly be removed without an effort, to which the Marivaux and La Chaussées were manifestly unequal. Elegance, however, must at all costs be attained, and all that could be done was to veil the coarseness of manners with pink gauze. Pathos examined itself in the mirror, and rearranged its costume. Even the author of *L'Esprit des Lois* wrote *Le Temple de Gnide*, and declared that "il n'y a que des têtes bien frisées et poudrées qui connaissent tout le mérite" of the new psychology.

Among the changes which followed the accession of Louis XV, none was more remarkable than the complete decay of theological ardour. The psychology of the great preachers whose eloquence had ruled French prose in the seventeenth century wholly evaporated. Gay revellers galloped over the prostrate statue of Bossuet, and it needed stronger arms than those of Massillon to keep them at bay. That graceful

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religious moralist was the last of the preachers, the only survivor of a giant race. But he was as innocuous as he was pious, and Voltaire could, without disturbance, enjoy having Massillon's sermons read aloud to him when he dined alone. If theology declined, science took its place. That embracing genius, Buffon, instructed an eager world in a new passion, the love of natural objects. The Eighteenth Century, having thrown off all illusions about human nature, was obliged to endow animals and plants, and presently lakes and mountains, with endearing and imaginary qualities. In this, as in much else, England served as a lighthouse, by which taste was steered in the night. England to the Eighteenth Century was the fortunate island, the one state in which thought was free. Her moral philosophy was seductive, and not Shaftesbury alone, but Mandeville and even Collins had his French disciples. Landscape, through Pope's convention and Thomson's realism, filtered into the intellectual scene, upon which the effect of the English novelists, particularly of Richardson, was immense. *Clarissa* continued to be the most influential of novels until *La Nouvelle Héloïse* diverted sentimentality into a wider channel.

The influence of polite society on literature was paramount in the Eighteenth Century, when it reached an ascendancy in France which has been seen nowhere else. Typical of the age is the famous portrait of Mme de Pompadour by La Tour; she sits, dressed in the height of fashion, in a delicate boudoir, with a folio volume of the *Encyclopédie* in front of her, the

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goddess of philosophedom. Earlier, the same marvellous La Tour had painted the Duchesse du Maine, as the supreme law-giver of literature, in her academical palace of Sceaux, that temple of the arts. It is in the pastels of the artists that we read the full refinement of the age, when books were written to stimulate and to please, while the one unpardonable sin was to be crude. The sportive gallant century romped and fiddled to its close, taking on dolphin-colours after the deaths of Voltaire and Rousseau in 1778. Its highest point had been reached in the days of its comparative sobriety, before the delicate ethics of Vauvenargues had succumbed under the pressure of the sentimentalists, and before the relaxation of manners had culminated in the boudoir story. But it was all consistent. From Fontenelle to Diderot, under many forms, the spirit of the Eighteenth Century remained coherent, doubtless with a more subtle unity than can be met with elsewhere in the history of the mind. This individuality gives its literary history in France a peculiar interest, and, for those who are not by temperament averse to its neatness and dryness, an essential charm.

*“ Il faict bon traduire les auteurs . . où il n’y a guiere que la
matiere à representier ; mais ceux qui ont donné beaucoup à la grace et
à l’elegance du langage, ils sont dangereux à entreprendre.”*

Apologie de Raimond Sebond.

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The Sofa : A Moral Tale

INTRODUCTION

OUR own generation of English readers is perhaps suffering from the fact that there is an extraordinary gap in our literature which does not exist in the French. It is possible that, if we had a series of works dealing more or less subtly with love in all its forms, we might have been saved the torrent of pretentious sex-novels, whose appeal is entirely luscious and unintellectual, with which this century has been deluged. In English literature there is none—or practically none—of that pondered, delicate and indelicate but always polished, treatment of love of which eighteenth-century French literature is full, none of those vivid memoirs which are so entertaining to historian, psychologist, and novel-reader alike. Our nearest approach is, probably, Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* on the one hand, and Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle*, with its *Memoirs of a Lady of Quality*, on the other. As a result we have no *Adolphe*, no *Chartreuse de Parme*, for such masterpieces can come only as the result of a long tradition, including such works as *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, itself a fine achievement, a tradition to which philosophers of the rank of Diderot were proud to add. Perhaps a perusal of their works, even in translation, may, by setting an example in form, improve our taste in

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these matters: for who among living writers, except Mr George Moore, has given us a glimpse of what such things may be? For in this respect our literary history has been unfortunate. Our Elizabethan song-writers stated the problems of love, but none elucidated them, though Donne was on the edge of analysis. The triumph of Puritanism, momentarily broken during the Restoration, which did not, however, have the leisure essential to the subject, held such inquiries outside the pale; while the Romantic movement, denying the physical basis of love, passing through puerility, has rotted to neurasthenia and prurience. Translation cannot fill our gap, but it may induce us to do so, for we should rescue psychology from between the covers of text-books, and, basing it upon experience and sensibility, use it as material for works of art.

Sensibility! that is, of course, the crux of the matter; and for this there must be openness and honesty, not the shamefaced lascivious peering which the libraries love to advertise by exclusion. Where there is no frankness there can be no art. For however much the French 'little classics' may shock the prude or make the coward tremble, they are by no means fitted to be guide books for callow Don Juans. Always and everywhere these authors, Bibiéna, de la Molière, de Boufflers, and Crébillon himself, insist upon the essential ingredients of sensibility and delicacy in love, upon a profound and sensitive understanding of the complex human being. What other safeguard is there against the bitter disillusion of the flesh-weary rake? Again and again they point out

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that if you seek to gratify the senses alone you will reap only tares, for the senses can never be satisfied. It would be beside the mark to say that the works of these *conteurs* are stern lessons in morality: they are not. They are, however, graceful inductions into something far harder to compass than rigid morality; they aim at the perilous balance of sympathy and understanding accompanying physical pleasure, for, while they deal largely with the body, they never forget the soul. This is true of the long list which includes, not only those already mentioned, but the Abbé Prévost, from whom Richardson might seem to derive Meusnier de Querlon, Benseval, in a sense Chateaubriand, and in our own day Raymond Radiguet and M. Julien Benda, not to mention Marcel Proust. They vary throughout the centuries as the tradition develops and manners alter, but those of the eighteenth century present a remarkably homogeneous body.

De Boufflers, it is true, is something different from the normal *conteur* of his day, for, apart from the fact that he dealt more directly than most with the social life of his time, he achieved a natural completeness of form which leaves one perfectly satisfied. And there is, besides, an unusual humanistic element in his work, born of contact with many different classes, races, and creeds, for he was at one time Governor of Senegal, where he appears to have been universally liked. Yet, in spite of his contact with the world, he had some of that naïf simpleness we associate with Rousseau, and he believed in the simple affections. There is a

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tenderness in his gaiety foreign to the work of Crébillon fils, and one might even say he was ever so little a sentimentalist, not enough to distort life, but enough to add a ribbon to its costume. Not that it is fair to say that Crébillon was altogether unromantic, but his is a romance of the social relations, as in the story of Zulema and Phenima, and one must confess that romance for him was apt to be, in Chamfort's famous phrase, "the contact of two skins."

For Crébillon liked things to be clear-cut, and this is what makes him the accurate and cold observer that he is. This alone should serve to clear him from the charge of being a purveyor of aphrodisiac writings, even if his intent were not throughout satirical. Yet the issue must not be confused: he was not satirical in the cause of prig-righteousness, but in that of refinement and frankness. In any case, the morality of his time as regards sex was not that of the Church of England; it was rather that of the Courts of Love of troubadour France, where not the choice of a lover was of importance, but the manner of loving. Yet again, it is never the merely physical that counts; there must be grace and delicacy, a degree of understanding, and above all the game of love must, like every other game, be played according to certain rules.

That particular portion of eighteenth-century society in which Crébillon moved, definitely tried to make love a part of the social texture, for whatever love might be—and Crébillon was far too wise to think that he had discovered this secret—love-making was a rational social pleasure. It was the great time

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killer, and, as happens frequently throughout the ages, it was a superb subject for conversation. For wherever there is leisure, love, of the kind worth talking about, thrives, and each age creates its own especial kind. That which belongs to this period is probably best ranked under the heading Stendhal described as *amour goût*, though it was later to be replaced by the *amour passion* of Julie de Lespinasse and Benjamin Constant. Thus for Crébillon, wherever *goût*, friendship, mutual inclination, respect are lacking, there can be no love, only lust, and his aversion to this is best shown in his story of Amina. But for this to be happy it must be frank, free from sophistry, and not arrived at by intricate false thinking, as in the case of Mochles and Almahide. Nor must there be any false prudery, as exhibited in the cruel story of Zuleika, nor coxcomb pretensions as with Mazulim. But however much the coarse lovers are to be reprehended, Crébillon never saw the need for indignation, and thus he coolly laid their vices bare with no more scorn than is needed to give a certain salt to his story. However, in spite of the airy, unmoral gaiety of his manner, we are never allowed to forget his satiric intent, though to some it may appear that the pill is too thickly covered with gilding to make it at all effective. Yet, to his own time, he did not appear to be erring on this side, and amazing and unusual as his stories may appear to us, he will scarcely be accused of exaggerating by any who have read the memoirs, say, of the Ducs de Richelieu or Lauzun, or of Benseval or the Comte de Tilly. Indeed, to many people of his time he was felt

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to be too near the truth, and some of them took their revenge.

Not only *Le Sopha* but his earliest tales are placed in an Oriental milieu, not to make them fantastic, but to give him greater freedom to deal personal strokes and bring his satire home. In this he was only following the example of Montesquieu, but it did not save him from prison. Indeed, he was perhaps a little too determined to show that by Agra he meant Paris. His bored Shah—and was ever monarch more bored than Louis XV?—dwells in a realm where patchwork and embroidery are the rage, as they were, according to Marmontel, the rage in Paris. Nor need we go to French sources to realize this, for the Earl Marshal writing to Hume during his stay in Paris, says: "I hope that we shall not get back a dandy, a dapper man at the embroidering". And this is only one of a hundred touches to bring the matter close, and to suggest that it was no distant society he was speaking of; and indeed, a Parisian of Parisians, it was hardly to be expected of him.

He was born on the 12th of February, 1707, only a fortnight after his parents were married. His father, Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, who appears to us as a rather grim lawyer and writer of grimmer tragedies of blood nobody is now ashamed of not having read, was at that time sunning himself in the success of his *Atrée et Thyeste*, which was frequently performed at Court. The boy, Claude Prosper, after a period at a Jesuit school, thus grew up in those unequivocally gay Regency days which gave him so much of his material,

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and began his literary life by collaborating with the Italian actors in some light satirical pieces for their theatre, which were not modelled upon his father's, for those he could never find time to read. The old lawyer had by now fallen upon evil days; he had secured no Court pickings, except some minor treasury post which had expired in 1721; his father had died insolvent, and his wife (at any rate penniless) was dead. He retired to a garret, which he shared with dogs, cats, and ravens, and, like a true sage, neglected food and cleanliness—but not tobacco—until he became one of the immortal forty in 1731. The wisdom of his son was of a different order, and flitting about as a gay and lettered man of the Town, frequenting *sociétés joyeuses* with Caylus and others, he gained the patronage of the dowager Princesse de Conti.

He was soon to need it, for in 1734 he published *L'Écumoire, ou Tanzaï et Néadarné, histoire japonaise*, a scarcely disguised satire which caused a terrific uproar among the rulers and the elect. He was aiming at the Papal Bull *Unigenitus*: he was undermining the Monarchy itself; worse, he was lampooning the Cardinal de Rohan, the High Priest Saugrenutio was undoubtedly the Bishop of Rennes, and the fairy Cucumber was too obviously the Duchesse du Maine. The book was at once suspended "on account of its indecencies and certain portraits which were easily interpreted". Anything might happen to the rash young man from the fury of outraged dignitaries, and, to ensure his skin, the Cardinal Fleury

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had him placed in the Bastille, or so it is always said, though he was actually admitted to the prison of Vincennes on December the 8th, 1734. The rhymsters of the time, delighted to have another subject for their rapid pens, sang :

Pour un conte de Cendrillon
Agence de quelque boutille,
Notre pauvre ami Crébillon
Vient d'être mis à la Bastille ;
Depuis qu'il est au galbanon
Il s'en faut beaucoup qu'il babille,
Car il est sérieux ce dit-on,
Comme un âne que l'on étrille.

But he was not there for long. The Princesse de Conti had him released, heaping coals of fire on his head with a "reproof which could not have been more gracious or tender-hearted". In his book he had described his heroine as "absent-minded as a princess"; and Madame de Conti on releasing him said: "You see, all princesses are not absent-minded". Her favour, however, did not save him from five years' exile from Paris, which he spent largely at Sens.

But times do not change much, and the interdiction of his book made it only the more sought after, to the greater profit of the booksellers. The ladies especially were eager to get it, and, though pious abbés and severe lords lieutenant in the provinces deplored it, they lost no opportunity of reading it. It made them very sorry for the father, especially as some thought he was the author, and not all Claude's protestations that it had been printed at the printing house of the

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Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques could make them accept what they admitted to be a true picture of manners, as good literature. "Paris is mad, and this work has been over-estimated; good taste is dead; to succeed nowadays a man must write imbecilities." No matter, such garbage would soon rot into oblivion; it would be like that ridiculous book translated from the English, *Gulliver's Travels*; it would be the rage for a few days, and then would sink into well-deserved obscurity. Voltaire also thought Paris was mad, not for liking the book which had brightened his solitude, but for putting Crébillon in prison.

When the young man returned to Paris he found his father not only Censor Royal, but once more a famous playwright, so successful as to arouse the competitive spirit in Voltaire, who re-handled no fewer than five of his plays. But father and son were not on good terms. When asked in conversation which of his works he thought the best, the old man replied that he did not know; but, he added, pointing to his son: "That one is undoubtedly my worst". Claude retorted, referring to a report that Prosper was not the author of his plays, by giving as a reason that the son could not but be the father's own handiwork, and that whatever might be said of the plays, Crébillon fils was not *des Chartreux*. For the latter moved in a different circle, and wherever he went gained a reputation for kindness, honesty, and general good behaviour, in spite of a certain tendency to gibe at his father, much to the astonishment of the nineteenth-century commentators, who seem to have been

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unable to reconcile decent living with clear-headedness as to love. Jocund his muse was, and, though it would be rash to say that his life was chaste, it was never scandalous. Yet it had some excuse for being so, and one of his adventures gives us a clue to his attitude of hatred towards inconstant women. Just before the publication of his first book he fell in love with an actress called Gaussin, who promised to marry him. The elated lover posted off gaily to Fontainebleau to have the marriage-contract drawn, but, coming back to Paris with it in his pocket, was told that his speed had been wasted, or had not been great enough. For in the interval his actress had found a rich Milanese, and remarked coldly, but with obvious commonsense, that, having got a lover, she no longer needed a husband.

It is possible that this lady is immortalized in *Le Sopha*, which appeared in 1740, in contravention, we may note, of a Royal Decree which had forbidden its publication. This again, of course, helped only to advertise it the more: it sold widely, and the author was exiled to a distance of fifty leagues from Paris. But not much more than three months later he was back to enjoy his success, which was great. The book was translated into English in the next year, and was read by Sterne, who admitted to having studied Rabelais and Crébillon first before beginning to write. Further, the delicacy of the author's mind so struck Lady Henrietta Maria Stafford that she came over to France to become his mistress in 1744, the mother of his child in 1746, and his wife in 1748. Although,

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apparently, a *dévoté*, ugly, clumsy-mannered, and cross eyed, she seems to have made Crébillon happy, and he made her a model husband.

However, his literary success and his exemplary behaviour do not seem to have endeared him to his father, who finding that he could not both write plays like *Catiline* and adequately carry out his censorial duties, complained that the latter were too heavy, and demanded a coadjutor. But, to Claude's surprise and indignation the father did not suggest that this functionary should be his son. He proposed for the place an abbé called Rousseau, an academic laureate. This attitude seemed unnatural to the son, a menace to paternal tradition; so he demanded the post, which he was prepared to take without the miserable stipend of six hundred francs the abbé was to get. Of course, he said, he did not write so well as the abbé, but did the police mind about that? Yet he did not get the post, and founded instead the famous literary circle with Piron and Collé, which met regularly to dine at the *Caveau*.

Lady Henrietta died in about 1756, while their son had died in infancy, and Claude's life began to pass into its final phase, during which he was to outlive his literary reputation. In 1759, however, he was made Censor Royal (on the retirement of his father, who lived until 1762), and was to be found at the Wednesday dinners of the *Pellerier*, where he may have met Garrick, Sterne, and Wilkes. Certainly he corresponded with Lord Chesterfield, who doubtless saw in him something of that calm balance he would have

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wished to find in his son. In 1774 he became Police Censor as well, and, adding a pension to his other emoluments—perhaps through the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, who had obtained him the Royal Censorship—he ended his life on April 12th, 1777, in the warm aura which surrounds a comfortably situated man, a genial fellow, and a conscientious civil servant.

His works have their place in the French tradition, a little to one side of, and a little below, those of Marivaux, according to Sainte-Beuve. To Marivaux at all events he appeared worthy of attention, who, recognizing himself in one of the characters of *L'Écumoire*, replied in *Le Paysan Parvenu*. “Crébillon”, he says, “relied too much on the licentiousness of his subjects and the freedom of his tone, to attract readers; he tried to make the reader his accomplice”. To which the old officer answers: “It is true the reader is also a man; but he is then a man at leisure, a man of taste and delicacy who expects that his mind will be amused, who is perfectly ready to be debauched, but elegantly, with politeness and decency”. If indeed Crébillon had wished merely to debauch the reader, he might, to be sure, have flattered his vanity more, but that would have been to kill the satire. And if, as I think we are entitled to do, we regard Shah Baham in this tale as representing the average idle reader, who calls a story that is not sportive no story at all, he could hardly have written otherwise. On the other side there is the charming Sultana, perhaps Madame de Pompadour, who makes such

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admirable literary criticism, which expresses, of course, Crébillon's own views. For Crébillon was an artist: otherwise his work would not have survived. The smoothness of his prose, woven together with an extraordinarily small vocabulary, is amazing. He never raises his voice, or gesticulates, so that the tale is never made to suggest deeper emotions than it can bear. If his treatment of love is restricted to certain kinds in his book, his limitation is deliberate, as Amanzei's last remarks prove, and in accordance with what he knew he could do. It is absurd to say he is not serious because the life of the people he satirized was frivolous and inane. By his very reservations he gives, as Mr Aldous Huxley has said, "a sort of consistency" to his creations and their idiotic existence. And that is a high achievement.

Nevertheless, his literary reputation has had a not altogether unchequered career. Fashionable for a time in his own day, his books soon dropped out of popular esteem in the flood of not very dissimilar works, though Voltaire, as we have seen, praised him, and the Prince de Ligne thought his books worth annotating. The growls of French commentators grew loud against him in the nineteenth century, and the less they read him the more violent they became. He depicted the manners of his time in colours that were too lively, they declared, and so, from being the Petronius of France, he sank to the level of "a precursor of the Marquis de Sade," a sin now venial and even flattering, but once considered mortal. However, towards the end of the century he was rescued by the

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editor of the edition from which this translation is made, who surely put the matter on a sound foot when he said :

Au xviii ième Siècle, on s'embarrassait moins de ces distinctions [morales] que de nos jours. La nature avait repris le dessus sur la convention, et les mœurs très libres acceptaient que l'on dît sans ambages ce que l'on faisait, ce qui se fait encore chez nous, mais que l'hypocrisie nous fait taire ;

for, though times change, the human creature does not.

PREFACE

NOT many centuries ago, a certain prince named Shah Baham ruled over India. He was a grandson of the magnanimous Shah Riar, whose great doings have been recorded in *The Thousand and One Nights*, and who, among other things, took so great a pleasure in strangling women and in listening to tales; the very one, indeed, who reprieved that incomparable lady Sheherezade, solely on account of the lovely tales she could tell.

It was either because Shah Baham was not extremely nice in points of honour, or because his womenfolk did not lie with their blacks, or (which is quite as likely) because he was kept in the dark about it—at all events he was a kind and easy husband. From Shah Riar, to tell the truth, he had inherited nothing but his virtues and his liking for stories. It is even stated that the collection of Sheherezade's tales, which his august grandfather had caused to be written out in letters of gold, was the only book he had ever vouchsafed to read.

Yet, even if it be true that tales adorn the understanding, and that the knowledge or notions that we glean from them are both agreeable and sublime, it is dangerous to read nothing but books of this sort. Only those who are really enlightened, above prejudice, knowing the hollowness of science, realize how

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useful to society such books really are; and how much one ought to esteem, and even revere, those who have genius enough to invent them, and sufficient firmness of mind to devote their lives to making them, in spite of the stigma of frivolity which pride and ignorance have fostered upon this sort of writing. The salutary lessons such fables contain, the fine flights of imagination so often to be met with in them, and the ludicrous notions they always abound in, make no appeal to the vulgar; for these commend most what they least understand, while flattering themselves that they do so perfectly.

Shah Baham provides a memorable instance of mankind's blindness in this matter. Although he was as familiar with the earliest days of fairy as if he had lived in them; although no one was more curiously acquainted than he with the notorious realm of Djinnistan, or had more knowledge of the famous dynasties of the first kings of Persia; and although, beyond question, he knew more than any man of his time about such events as have never taken place, he was said to be the most ignorant prince in the world.

It is true that he told stories with so little skill (which was the more tiresome as he was forever telling them) that he was unavoidably found a little tedious: especially since his only audience consisted of women and courtiers, who, commonly as refined as they are superficial, are likely to care more for an elegant turn of phrase than to be struck by the boldness or truth of an idea. It is no doubt from what his own court said about Shah Baham that Sheikh Ibn Taher Abu

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Feraki, an author of that prince's day, has drawn him for us, such as we shall see him below, in his great history of India. In the place where he speaks of the stories he says:

Shah Baham, the first of that name, was an ignorant prince, to the last degree effete. No one could have less sense; and (which is usual enough in those who are like him in that respect) no one could credit himself with more. He was always astonished at every ordinary thing, and never really understood but what was absurd, and out of nature. Although he might go a whole year without a thought, there was hardly a day in which he would for a minute hold his tongue. Nevertheless, he would modestly say of himself that he laid no claim to being witty: but that for profound contemplation he believed he had no fellow.

He did not care a jot for any of the pleasures which call for the use of the mind; any exercise, of any sort at all, was his aversion: and yet he was not idle. He had birds, which never ceased to amuse him enormously; parrots which, thanks to the pains he took over their education, were the stupidest parrots in all India, not to mention his monkeys, on which he spent no small part of his time; and his womenfolk, who, when all the animals in his menagerie palled, seemed to him very proper for his diversion.

In spite of such high avocations, and such varied pleasures, the Sultan still found time hang heavy on his hands. Even his darling stories, which never failed to arouse his astonishment and veneration, and which it was death to criticize, became insipid by dint

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of being repeated too often. He still admired them, but though he admired, he yawned. At last tedium pursued him into the very apartments of his women-folk, where he spent a part of his life in watching them embroider and make patchwork; arts he thought extremely highly of, considering their invention as the highest flight of human ingenuity, and to which, in the end, he required all his courtiers to apply themselves.

He rewarded those who excelled in them too well for any in his Empire to neglect them. To embroider or to patch was at that time the only means by which anyone in India could rise to a post of honour. The Sultan recognized no other kind of ability whatever, or at least took it for granted that a man who had such talents would naturally possess those requisite for being a good general or a consummate statesman. To show how far he was convinced of it, he raised to the post of Grand Vizier an idle courtier, one of that breed who not knowing how to pass their time, employ it in pestering kings with their very existence. This man, who had for a long time been lost among the fry, luckily for himself was discovered to be one of the finest patchworkers in the kingdom, just at the period when it pleased Shah Baham to honour patch-working; and since he was not, like so many others, forced to cabal and contrive, he owed to the superiority of his genius alone the splendid honour of cutting patches next his master, and the highest post in the Empire.

Among all the Sultan's wives the Sultana Queen

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was especially looked up to, for by reason of her wit she was the delight of all who, in so frivolous a court, still had the spirit to think and to improve their minds. She alone discerned and encouraged merit, and the Sultan himself rarely dared to be of a mind different from hers, although she little approved either of his tastes or of his pleasures: and when she rallied him upon his monkeys and his other pastimes, he would confine himself to saying she was waspish, which is the objection fools invariably make to persons of wit.

One day Shah Baham was in the women's apartments of his court, where, though he was watching patchworking with incredible earnestness, he could not combat the tedium which weighed him down, and said with a yawn: "My falling asleep is not to be wondered at. No one has a word to say. Oh I *would* like some conversation!"

"Well, and what do you wish us to talk to you about?" the Sultana asked.

"How can I tell?" he answered. "Am I supposed to know that into the bargain? Because I want you to speak to me about something, must I also indicate what is to be said to me? You know, you are not nearly so intelligent as you think you are: you all moon more than you talk; and apart from the occasional clever sayings, three-quarters of which I do not understand at all, you seem to me as flat and dusty as anything. Do you suppose that if Queen Sheherezade were still alive and here, she would not tell us the most lovely stories in the world, without waiting to be begged by my aunt Dinazarde either? But

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there, speaking of her, I have an idea! However good her memory may have been, she could not possibly have retained all the stories she had heard, and someone must know just those she had forgotten: nor can I believe that nobody has made any up since her time, nor that somebody does not make them up nowadays."

"Spare your doubts, Sire, on that head," the Vizier cried, "for I can assure your Majesty that not only do I know some, but that I even have the gift of making up such fanciful ones, that your late grandmother's do not better them in that respect."

"O Vizier! Vizier!," said the Sultan, "that is saying a great deal! My grandmother was a person of rare genius".

"Truly", the Sultana cried, "much of it is needed to tell stories! Would not one think, to listen to you, that a tale is the masterpiece of the human mind? And yet, what can be more puerile? What sort of work (if, indeed, a tale deserves the name) what sort of work is it, I ask, where nature is always flouted, and in which the common notions of things are continually upset? which, based upon the sham-marvellous and trivial, relies only on the extraordinary, and on the omnipotence of faëry; which turns the order of things and the elements upside down, only to manufacture ridiculous toys, strange to think of, I agree, but which often have nothing in them to compensate for the extravagance of the invention? We should be lucky, indeed, if these wretched fables only damaged the understanding, without as they do,

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inflaming the heart with pictures too lively drawn for modest minds."

"Mere prattle," the Sultan said gravely. "Big words which mean nothing. What you have just said sounds very fine at first, striking enough, I admit, but on reflecting a little one cannot help. . . . After all, here we are only concerned to know whether you are in the right: for, as I meant to say, and as I have just proved, I do not believe you are: and I assure you that it was not merely for the sake of airing my wit; but since I have always liked a story, it is obvious that a story cannot be a silly thing. I am the last person whom you will persuade that a Sultan can be an ass. Besides, that is to say, by the way, it is equally clear that a marvellous thing, by which I mean a thing . . . as I could explain if I wished to . . . but let us be frank, what does it matter after all? I maintain, personally, that I like stories, and besides, that I only find them amusing when they are, as people of taste have it, a little sportive. That makes them so interesting, so affecting! At all events, I see, I take your meaning perfectly: it is as though you were to tell me that you know a few stories, and that you make them up as well. You are the very man for me. It occurred to me that, to make the days seem less long, we should each of us tell a story, and when I say story I know what I am talking about. I want wonders, fairies, talismans, at least make no mistake on that point; for those are the only things that are really true. Well then? Are we all agreed to tell stories? Mahomet help me! But why do I ask for his help?

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for even without it I could make up stories better than anybody else, seeing that I come of a house well known for them, and, I need not be accused of boasting, no bad ones neither.

“ Further, as there is nothing of favouritism about me, I rule that each one of us is to speak in turn; the order will be decided not by my wishes but by casting lots. I graciously permit everyone to tell me a tale, which shall be told every day for half an hour more or less, according to my fancy ”.

Having uttered these words, he made all the Court draw lots: and, to the mortification of the Vizier, the choice fell upon a young courtier, who after receiving permission of the Sultan, began as follows:—

THE SOFA: A MORAL TALE

CHAPTER I

THE LEAST TEDIOUS IN THE BOOK

“SIRE, your Majesty is not unaware that, although I am his subject, I do not live under the same divine law as he does, and that I acknowledge no other God but Brahma.”

“And if I *am* aware of it”, the Sultan said, “what difference does that make to your story? In any case it is your own affair. So much the worse for you if you believe in Brahma; you would do a hundred times better to believe in Mahomet! I speak as a friend; do not get it into your head that I am merely showing what a theologian I am, for I assure you it is all the same to me. Well?”

“We adherents of the Brahmin sect believe in metempsychosis”, Amanzei (such was his name) proceeded. “That is to say, not to burden your Majesty’s mind out of season, that when our soul leaves one body it enters into another, and so on successively, for as long as it shall please Brahma, or until our soul is become sufficiently purified to be ranked among those which, in the fulness of time, he considers worthy of everlasting bliss.

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“Although the doctrine of metempsychosis is generally received among us, yet we have not all equally good reason for believing in it, since there are very few persons to whom it has been granted to remember the different transmigrations of their souls. It ordinarily happens that when a soul leaves a body in which it has been confined and enters into another, it loses all recollection either of the knowledge it had acquired or of the events in which it had borne a part.

“Thus our errors are continually hidden from us, and we embark upon a new career with a soul as fresh, and as prone to error and vice, as when Brahma first drew it out of that vast flaming whirlpool of which it formed a part while awaiting its habitation.

“Many among us murmur at this edict of Brahma, but I doubt if this be reasonable. Our souls, fated to pass from body to body throughout a long cycle of centuries, would nearly always be woeful if they remembered what they had been. A soul, for instance, which had once animated the body of a king, could not avoid keen pangs of despair on finding himself housed in a reptile, or in the carcass of one of those obscure mortals whose great wretchedness makes them still more to be pitied than the vilest beast.

“I grant that a man who found himself in the lap of luxury, or raised to the top of the tree, might, if he remembered having been an insect, less abuse the affluent or dazzling position which the goodness of Brahma had provided for him. Nevertheless, when I

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consider the pride, harshness, and insolence of those who, though born in the rabble, have been raised high by fortune, and how promptly they forget their former state, I am led to believe that in passing from one body to another, their former vileness would slip from their minds even more quickly, and would have no effect upon their conduct.

"Moreover, the soul would unavoidably be overburdened by the vast number of its memories of earlier days, and, being perhaps more concerned for what it had been than for what it then was, might neglect the duties proper to its present body, and so ruffle the harmony of the universe instead of contributing to it."

"By Mahomet! my dear fellow", the Sultan said, "I believe you are moralizing at me."

"Sire", Amanzei answered, "these are mere preliminary reflections, which I think to be of some value".

"Of no earthly value, you may take it from me", Shah Baham answered. "I tell you, and I ought to know best, that I have no taste for morals, and I shall be much obliged if you will drop them".

"I shall obey your commands", Amanzei answered. "Nevertheless, it remains for me to tell your Majesty that Brahma does sometimes allow us to remember what we have been, especially when he has inflicted some especially disagreeable thing upon us: and to prove that this is so, I remember perfectly well having been a sofa".

"A sofa!" the Sultan exclaimed. "Pooh! pooh! that sort of thing does not happen. Do you take me for an ostrich, to expect me to digest stories like that?"

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I have a good mind to have you toasted a little, to teach you to tell me such trumped-up stuff in such a barefaced way."

"Your benign Majesty is out of sorts to-day", the Sultana said. "It is part of your august nature to question nothing, and yet you refuse to believe that a man may have been a sofa. That is not like your usual self."

"Is that so?" the Sultan asked, gravelled by the objection. "All the same it does not seem to me that I am in fault. I cannot possibly be. . . . No, egad! I am right. In all conscience I cannot believe what Amanzei says: am I a Moslem for nothing?"

"Bravo!" the Sultana replied. "Well then, since it is a question of conscience, listen to what Amanzei has to say, and do not believe him."

"True!" the Sultan continued. "Then it will not be because the thing is incredible that I shall not believe it, but because, even if it were true, I ought not to believe it. I quite see that that makes a difference. Then you have really been a sofa, my dear Amanzei? What a terrible experience that must have been! And tell me, were you embroidered?"

"Yes, Sire", Amanzei answered. "The first sofa in which my soul dwelt was rose-coloured, embroidered with silver."

"Well done!" the Sultan said. "You must have been a tolerably fine piece of furniture. And why did your Brahma make you a sofa of all things? What was the point of that farcical prank? A sofa! That is beyond me!"

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"That", Amanzei answered, "Brahma did to punish my soul for its ill-discipline. If he had put it into another human body, he would not have been able to approve its behaviour, and no doubt he thought it would be more humiliating for me to be a sofa than to be a reptile.

"I remember that on leaving the body of a woman, my soul entered that of a young man. And as he was an egregious fop, a busy-body, a scandal-monger, a vain butterfly, an authority in trifles, serious only about his dress, his complexion, and a hundred other vapid nothings, my soul hardly noticed that it had changed its abode."

"It would be extremely curious", the Sultan interrupted, "to know what you did while you were a woman: it would make a vastly diverting tale. I have always thought that women were mysterious creatures. I do not know if I make myself clear, but I mean one finds it hard to tell what they are really at."

"Perhaps", Amanzei answered, "we should not be at such a loss on that head if we believed them less artful. As far as I remember, when I was a woman I found a mine of mirth in persons who believed my thoughts were studied, when they were the spontaneous flights of my unrestrained fancy, and who, because they imagined I was deep, never saw through me an inch. I was thought double-dealing when I was candid, and when I was frank I was called a flirt: and whenever my heart was really touched I was made out to be callous. I was nearly always supposed to be what I was not, or at any rate no longer was. Those

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most concerned to know me well, with whom I was most open, to whom even, by reason of my natural indiscretion or the inclinations of my heart, I revealed my most secret actions and my truest feelings, were not those who believed in me most, or understood me best. They only wanted to judge me according to their preconceived idea of me, and vowed they knew me well once they had docketed me to their own satisfaction."

"I was sure of it", the Sultan said. "One never knows women properly, and, as you say, I have long, as far as I am concerned, given over trying. But let us drop the subject: it sharpens the mind unduly, and has been your excuse for making a long preamble I could very well have done without, and for not answering what I asked you. I thought I said I wanted to know what you *did* while you were a woman."

"I have only a very faint idea of that", Amanzei answered. "What I remember most clearly is that I was wanton in my youth, and never really hated or loved; that, born without a strong bent, I became what people would have me be, or what my interests or my pleasures demanded; that at the end of a lax life I turned hypocrite, and finally, in spite of a prudish mask, died thinking over all my favourite past delights."

"It was apparently owing to my addiction to couches that Brahma conceived the idea of confining my soul in such a piece of furniture. He decreed that it should retain all its faculties in that prison, no

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doubt not so much to mitigate the horrors of my lot as to make me feel them the more. He further decreed that my soul should begin a new lease of life only when two persons, with myself as opportunity, should render each other the first fruits of mutual affection."

"There now!" the Sultan cried. "There's a deal of fiddle-faddle simply to say that . . ."

"Surely you will not be so gracious as to give us an explanation!" the Sultana interjected.

"Why on earth not?" he replied. "I like to hear a spade called a spade. However, if you are not of my mind, by all means let Amanzei be as obscure as he pleases. Thanks be to the Prophet, I shall always understand him."

"I remembered enough both of what I had done and of what I had seen", Amanzei proceeded, "to realize that the conditions under which Brahma was granting me my new life would keep me no small length of time in the furniture he had chosen for my prison; but the permission he gave me to transfer myself at pleasure from sofa to sofa somewhat alleviated the hardship. This freedom brought a variety into my life which could not but make it less wearisome; and, moreover, my soul was as alive to the absurdities of other people as when it had animated a woman; and the pleasure of being able to ensconce myself in the most private corners, and of being a third party in matters supposed to be a dead secret, made amends for my sufferings.

"After Brahma had pronounced my doom, he

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himself bore my soul into a sofa which the maker was about to deliver to a woman of quality, reputed to be superbly chaste; but just as it is said that few men are heroes to their valets, so I may safely affirm that few women are saints to their sofas."

CHAPTER II

WILL NOT BE TO EVERYBODY'S TASTE

A sofa was never relegated to a hall, and, at the house of the lady to whom I was to belong, I was placed in a closet apart from the rest of her palace, where, she said, she often retired simply for pious meditation, and to devote herself more wholly to Brahma. When I entered this closet, I found it hard to believe, from the way it was arranged, that it served only for such solemn purposes. Not that it was at all sumptuous, or that anything in it seemed too elaborate; at first sight everything in it appeared distinguished rather than cosy; but, on considering it maturely, one could not but detect an hypocritical indulgence, furniture convenient for certain agreeable usages, things, in fact, which do not lend themselves to austerity, and which are not habitual with it. It struck me that I myself was a trifle gay in colour for a woman who protested she was so far removed from flirt.

“Soon after my arrival, my mistress came into the closet: she looked indifferently upon me, seemed satisfied, but did not praise me mightily, and with a cold, absent-minded air, sent the maker away. As soon as she was alone, her gloomy and severe expression relaxed. I beheld another bearing, and other

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eyes: she tested me with a care which showed me that she did not intend to keep me only for show. Yet this frolicsome trial of me, and the gay and tender expression she had assumed the moment she was sure of being unobserved, did not make me modify the high opinion they had of her in Agra.

"I knew that souls, however perfect they may be considered, always have a pet vice, often resisted, but usually victorious; that they seem to deny themselves certain pleasures only to taste of them later with greater relish—in short, that for them virtue resides in repentance rather than in self-denial. I drew the conclusion that Fatima was lazy, and would have blamed myself had I at that stage allowed my conjectures to travel further a-field.

"The first act she performed after the one I have described was to open a secret cupboard let into the wall, artfully hidden from all eyes, and take a book out of it. From this cupboard she went to another, where many volumes were ostentatiously displayed. From there likewise she took a book, which she tossed upon me with an impatient disdain, and returned, with the one she had first chosen, to relapse into the downiest part of the pile of cushions heaped upon me."

"Tell us now, Amanzei", the Sultan interrupted; "was this wiseacre woman of yours pretty at all?"

"Indeed she was, Sire", Amanzei answered. "She was beautiful, more so than one might suppose. I went so far as to think that with less prudishness, with fewer of those soulful looks, which arouse contempt, it is true, but also kindle desire, she might

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have held her own with anybody. Her features were beautiful, but without lure or liveliness, and they wore only that smug disdain without which women of her cast think themselves lost to virtue. At first sight everything about her seemed to indicate neglect of her person, and contempt of how she might look. Although she had a good figure, she held herself ill; and if her walk was distinguished, it was because she thought a slow, stately step became persons whose minds were bent on serious things. Her apparent hatred of self-adornment did not go to that extreme of negligence by which virtuous women nearly always make themselves repulsive: her clothes were simple and sober-hued; but even in their decorum one could detect a tasteful choice: she even took care to lose nothing of the elegance of her shape, and one could easily see that under colour of austerity she luxuriated in extravagant cleanliness.

"The book she had taken last did not seem to be the one which pleased her most. Nevertheless, it was a ponderous volume of maxims, composed by a Brahmin. Whether she thought herself well supplied with home-made ones, or that these did not bear upon the subjects she liked, at all events she did not chose to read so much as a couple of them, and soon dropped this book, to take up the one she had slipped out of the secret cupboard, and which was a romance full of tender situations lively depicted. This literature seemed to me so little suited to Fatima, that I could not recover from my surprise. 'No doubt', I assured myself, 'she is making a trial of her strength, to see

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how far her soul is proof against those many suggestions so apt to unsettle the minds of others'.

"Far from guessing, at that time, the motives which made her act in a manner so opposite to the principles I believed hers, I only ascribed good ones to her. Nevertheless, this book appeared to enliven her; her eyes became more sparkling, and she left off reading it less to rid herself of the thoughts it awakened in her than to give herself over to them with greater zest. Recovering at last from the reverie she seemed buried in, she was about to take the book up again, when she heard a noise which made her hide it away. She armed herself, against all eventualities, with the Brahmin's work, which she evidently thought better suited for show than for reading.

"A man came in who bore himself so respectfully, that, in spite of the nobility of his features and the richness of his dress, I first of all took him for one of Fatima's slaves. But she greeted him with such rancour, seemed so put out at his presence, and so wearied with what he said, that I began to suspect that this ill-used man could be none other than her husband. I was not mistaken. For some considerable time she sourly repelled his earnest entreaty to be allowed to sit by her, and in the end she gave her consent, only to overwhelm him, in galling detail, with the faults she declared him daily guilty of. This husband, the unhappiest in all Agra, submitted to this petulant upbraiding with so great a gentleness as to make me indignant on his account. But his high opinion of Fatima's virtue was not the sole

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reason of his meekness: Fatima was beautiful, and, though she appeared not to care a rap for being attractive, she was so all the same. However little she wished to appear lovable in her husband's eyes, she roused his flame. But the most bashful lover, even if he were telling his love for the first time to the woman of all women he was most afraid of, would be a thousand times less put to it than this husband was, to tell his wife what his feelings for her were. He implored her both tenderly and respectfully to respond to his ardours; she refused to do so for a great while, and ultimately yielded with a very ill grace.

“Although she most stubbornly refused to give him the least hint that she had not the utmost repugnance towards what he required of her, I believed I could detect that she was more susceptible than she wished to be thought. Her eyes glowed, she seemed more alert, she breathed a sigh or two, and, though still cool, she became less lethargic. Yet it was not her husband whom she loved. I do not know what impelled Fatima, whether gratitude made her less rigid, or that she wished her husband to renew his assiduities, but she allowed some tender though sententious words to replace the harsh, scolding phrases she had hurled at him when he arrived. It was plain that he did not guess her object, or was not much affected by it; and it was equally plain that his coldness and unresponsiveness were not to Fatima's liking. By little and little she worked up a quarrel, and in a trice endowed her husband with all the most odious vices. What horrible habits did he not indulge in!

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What debauchery! What dissipation! What a life! At length she showered so much abuse upon him that he was forced to fly from her. Fatima was piqued at his departure; the disquiet in her eyes, which I was able to interpret more readily than her husband, told me that it was not by going away that he would soothe her; and indeed, some strange enough words that she gave vent to when she was once more by herself, enlightened me as to the exact nature of her feelings.

"How this woman, the example and terror of her sex in Agra, whom they all hated, yet were proud to imitate; before whom the least reticent women, who never concealed their passions, thought themselves obliged to be hypocritical: how many people this woman would have reassured had they, like me, been able to see her in the freedom and solitude of her closet!"

"Yes indeed!" the Sultan struck in. "Was she a woman who really . . . and there are some who pretend. . . . It happens anyway! You must not think that what I mean is so uncommon. You know what, eh?"

"Your Majesty's explanation is so lucid", Amanzei answered, "that it is not very difficult to guess what you mean; and, without wishing to boast of my perspicacity, I dare believe that I have grasped your thought."

"Really!" the Sultan said laughing. "Well then, out with it! What did I think?"

"That Fatima was not at all what she wished to seem", Amanzei answered.

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"That's it, let me die!" the Sultan exclaimed.
"Go on! Upon honour, you have a deal of wit."

"To all appearance", Amanzei went on, "Fatima shunned all delights, but only to indulge in them with greater safety. She was not one of those feckless women who, having devoted their youth to making a stir, to dissipation, to the young man whom whim has made the fashion, at a more advanced age leave off complexion-paint and dress; and who, after having earned the scorn and contumely of their generation, wish to set up as its example and ornament; more to be despised for pretending to a virtue they do not possess than they were for the brazen way in which they flaunted their sins. No! Fatima was better advised. Lucky enough to be born with that duplicity which incites women to disguise their natures, and yet long to be honoured (not always their earliest longing), she had realized in good time that it is impossible to deny oneself pleasures without dragging out a cruelly dull existence, and that a woman cannot openly indulge in them without laying herself open to opprobrium and risks, and so turning these joys to ashes. Enmeshed in deceit from her tenderest years, she had striven less to correct the vicious leanings of her heart than to veil them under the guise of the most forbidding virtue. Her soul by nature—shall I say voluptuous? no; that was not Fatima's temper; her soul was set upon pleasure. Not refined, but sensuous, she gave herself over to lust, and knew nothing of love. She was not yet twenty years old; it was five years since she had been married, and eight

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since she had forestalled marriage. The things which usually captivate women had no charms for her; an amiable face, much readiness of mind maybe awakened her desires, but she did not succumb to them. Her choice fell upon those who would not be suspect, forced by their style of life to be dumb as to their joys, or upon those whose low estate shields them from public suspicion; who are won by money, silenced by fear, and who, apparently engaged in the most busy employment, for all that sometimes turn out to be the most fit for the mysteries of love. Fatima, in fine, being spiteful, choleric, and haughty, gave rein to her impulse without incurring any danger: even a flaw would have been grist to the mill of her reputation. Superior, imperious, harsh, cruel, and unfeeling, untrustworthy and incapable of friendship, her zeal for Brahma, the distress she testified at the irregularities of others, and her desire to bring them back to their better selves, cloaked and gilded her vices. Whenever she did harm, she meant so well! She was so piously vindictive! Her soul was so pure! How could one suspect a heart so upright and so candid of harbouring any selfish motive behind its righteous hatreds? ”

CHAPTER III

WHICH CONTAINS SOME THINGS HARD TO BELIEVE

“AFTER her husband had gone away, Fatima was about to resume her reading when an old Brahmin came in, followed by two old women whose spiritual adviser he said he was, though really he was their despot. Fatima rose to receive them in so demure and reserved a manner that anyone might have been hoodwinked. The old Brahmin had even to prevent her from prostrating herself before him, but he did it so complacently that I could at once see the value he set upon himself; he seemed so satisfied with her intentions with regard to him, so convinced even that he deserved still more, that I could not forbear laughing within myself at the holy vanity of this ridiculous person.

“Conversation between four people so unusually meritorious cannot but be at the expense of others. It is not, of course, rare for people given to dissipation to indulge in detraction; but, being more concerned with foibles than with vices, detraction is only a pastime for them, and they are not virtuous enough to regard it as a duty. They sometimes do harm to others, but they do not always mean to, or at least their levity, or their taste for frolic, prevents them from either dwell-

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ing on it or from wanting to make capital out of it. They know nothing of this dour, pompous way of speaking ill of others, which would be unforgivable were it not so needful to general reform; they . . .”

“No more of that!” the Sultan broke in angrily. “A pox on these musty aphorisms you keep on dishing up to us!”

“But, Sire”, Amanzei pleaded, “they are occasionally indispensable.”

“I tell you they are not”, the Sultan retorted. “And even if they were . . . In short, since these stories are being told for my sake, I expect them to be of the kind I like. Amuse me! and a truce if you please to all these endless moralizings which make my head ache. You want to set up for an orator, but, egad, I will see to it, and I swear, on the word of a Sultan, that I will kill the first man who dares serve me up an aphorism. We will see by and by how you get along.”

“I will steer clear of aphorisms”, Amanzei answered, “since they have the ill luck to displease your Majesty.”

“That’s fine!” the Sultan said. “Now get on!”

“Those who take a pleasure in speaking ill of others are ever agreeable to speaking well of themselves. Fatima, and those with her, had too good cause to think highly of their own persons not to despise all who were unlike them. While waiting for games to be brought them, they entered upon a conversation which did not belie their characters. The old Brahmin, however, spoke well of a woman whom

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Fatima knew, and the eulogy displeased her. Of all the things against which she lifted up her voice, love was the one which seemed the most blameworthy to her. If a woman loved, she might have all the most estimable qualities in her favour, yet nothing could save her from Fatima's hatred: but if she was a sink of the most pestilential and odious vices, so long as she was known not to have a lover, she was acclaimed as a most respectable person, whose virtue made her deserving of all homage.

"The lady whom the Brahmin praised, was, unhappily for her, in the class which aroused Fatima's indignation. 'Ah! that lost woman!' she said in a sour tone; 'how can you praise her?' The Brahmin excused himself on the ground that he did not know her to be addicted to such a censurable manner of living, and Fatima was charitable enough to enlighten him on her reasons for despising her.

"'Fatima', then said one of the women who was visiting her, 'I am sure, knowing as I do your generous nature and your love of righteousness, that you will be greatly touched by what I am about to tell you. Nahami, that very Nahami whose fall we have both so much deplored, Nahami, out of love with her errors, has all on a sudden withdrawn from society: she no longer paints her face.' 'Alas!' Fatima cried, 'she is indeed to be praised if this return to the fold be sincere! But, Madam, you are of the pure to whom all things are pure, and thus so easily gulled; I know, for I have found it so, that when one is born with such rectitude of heart as yours, one cannot

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conceive that others can be so unlucky as not to be the same as oneself. Still, it is a fault much on the right side to judge others leniently. But to come back to Nahami, I cannot help fearing that, at the bottom of her heart, being given over to the world as she is, she has not sincerely abjured her errors. It is easier to renounce face-paint than one's vices, and people often assume a more reserved and modest air not so much as a first step towards virtue, as to impose upon the world with regard to the disorders to which they are still in leash.' "

"My dear sir", Shah Baham said yawning, "this conversation is deadly; if you love me, cut it short. These people fret me beyond words. Honestly now, are you not sick of them yourself? For Heaven's sake get them out of the way."

"With the best will in the world, Sire", Amanzei answered. "After having made the utmost of their conversation about Nahami, they flung wide their net of detraction, and in a twinkling I heard all the gossip of Agra. Afterwards they praised each other, sat down glumly to play, and continued to do so in a spiteful, miserly way until they took their leave."

"I was on tenterhooks", the Sultan said. "You have made me very much obliged to you. Do you give me your word that those people will not come back?"

"Yes, Sire", Amanzei replied.

"Well", the Sultan proceeded, "to show you how well I can reward men for their services, I create you an Emir; it is also because you embroider well,

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because you work hard, and because I believe you will make something of your story; in fact . . . I like doing that sort of thing; and besides, one ought to encourage merit."

The new Emir, after having thanked the Sultan, went on as follows:

"In spite of Fatima's affability, I thought I could perceive that the visit of these persons had just the same effect upon her as it has had upon your Majesty, and that, had she been her own mistress, she would have spent her time in amusements different from those they had provided for her.

"As soon as they were gone out, Fatima sank into a deep but not gloomy reverie: her eyes softened, they wandered languishingly around her closet; it seemed as though she panted after something she had not got, or which she was afraid to allow herself. At last she called someone.

"At the sound of her voice, a young slave whose face was blooming rather than attractive, made his way into the room. Fatima gazed at him with eyes full of love and longing, but she nevertheless seemed irresolute and fearful.

" 'Shut the door, Dahis!' she said at last. 'Come, we are alone: you can, without the least danger, remember that I love you, and give me proofs of your affection for me.'

"On this command, Dahis, throwing off a slave's respectful mien, assumed that of a man made happy in his love. He seemed to me to have small delicacy or tenderness, but to be robust and full of fire, driven

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by his appetites, incapable of seeming to gratify them by degrees, and unversed in the arts of love, not wasting his time over delicious preludes, but applying himself at once to the main issue. He was no lover, but for Fatima, who was not in search of style, he was something more essential. Dahis flattered her crudely, but the want of refinement in his encomiums did not offend Fatima, for while he continued to give her vigorous proofs of the power of her charms, she felt she had praises enough.

“With Dahis, Fatima made generous amends for the restraint she had inflicted upon herself with her husband. Less punctilious in observing the strict rules of decency, her eyes sparkled with a joyful fire: she was prodigal of the most endearing epithets as well as of the most eager caresses; and far from screening from him anything that she felt, she surrendered herself wholly to her ecstasy. When she was calmer she called the attention of her lover to all the beauties of which she made him free, and even compelled him to solicit her anew for proofs of her goodwill, which, in his heart of hearts, he did not pine for.

“Dahis, on the contrary, seemed quite unmoved. He gazed stupidly at everything which Fatima’s kindness offered to his sight, but he took it all in only mechanically. His boorish heart felt nothing; it was not formed to leap for rapture. Nevertheless, Fatima seemed satisfied. That he was tongue-tied and blockish did not wound her pride in the least, since she had too many good reasons for believing him conscious of her charms not to prefer his unre-

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sponsiveness to the most extravagant ravings and the most wordy transports of a finished seducer.

"In suffering herself to be the instrument of his pleasures, Fatima showed plainly enough that she had as little delicacy as virtue, and that she did not expect from Dahis either that alertness in delight, or those tender nothings, which sensibility and polite manners rank higher than gratification, or in which, to speak more properly, gratification itself consists.

"At last Dahis went out, not before yawning two or three times. He is to be counted among those unfortunate people who, since they never think of anything, never have anything to say and who are fitter to employ than to listen to.

"Whatever opinion of her Fatima's amusements may have given me, I confess that I thought, now Dahis had left her, that there was nothing more for her to muse upon in her closet, and that she would shortly go out. I was wrong. She was an indefatigable muser in this kind. She had not long been supplied with the thoughts for which Dahis had supplied such ample food, when something occurred to give her more.

"A Brahmin, serious but young and fresh-looking, with one of those faces which are sprightly in spite of their self-possessed expression, came into the closet. Though he was in a Brahmin's frock, which is not exactly graceful, it was easy to see that he was got up in such a way as to stir the imagination of not a few prudes: indeed he was the most exclusive, most consolatory, most sought-after Brahmin in all Agra.

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He spoke so sweetly! they said: he made the taste for virtue steal so gently over erring souls! It was so easy to go astray if he was not there! So they spoke of him in public; you shall soon see to what in particular he owed these praises, and whether those which were the most loudly sounded were the ones he had most truly earned.

“This fortune-favoured Brahmin came towards Fatima in a suave, milky manner, insipid rather than courtly. You could see that he aimed at something else, but he copied ill those he chose for models, and the Brahmin peeped out beneath the borrowed mask.

“‘Queen of Hearts’, he said fatuously, ‘to-day you are more beauteous than the blissful Beings assigned to the service of Brahma! On seeing you my soul is wafted to a realm which has something celestial in it, and which I would wish you to partake of with me.’

“Fatima, in a languid voice, answered him in his own style; and, since the Brahmin did not change it, they entered upon a conversation which was tender enough, but in which love spoke so very oddly, and in a way so little suited to it, that had it not been for what they did, I should hardly have understood what they were talking about.

“Fatima, who was naturally quite deaf to eloquence, and who, for all that she said, did not rate even the Brahmin’s very highly, was the first to grow weary of phrases. The Brahmin, whom they pleased no more than they did her, soon followed her lead in dropping them, and this conversation, so insipid and

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sickly, finished in the same way as that with Dahis had begun. It must be observed, however, that Fatima, although she did the same things, was more particular about externals. She wished to appear delicate, and to make the Brahmin think that love alone had conquered her.

“The Brahmin, who, as far as character and face went, was not much unlike Dahis, did not in any way fall behind him, and deserved all the compliments which Fatima in her good nature continually lavished upon him. After they had paid their tribute to the warmth of love, they set to ridiculing virtue, enjoyed together the delight of deceiving others, and took and gave mutual lessons in hypocrisy. At last these two odious beings separated, and Fatima went off to plague her husband, and make a great to-do about her fleshly mortifications.

“During my stay with her I never discovered that she had any way of whiling away the time other than that which I have described to your august Majesty.

“Cautious as she was, Fatima was sometimes off her guard. One day when she was solacing with her Brahmin, chance brought her husband to the door of her closet, where he heard sighs, and certain expressions which surprised him. Fatima’s public conduct gave so little hint of her private amusements that I doubt whether her husband guessed at once whence came those sighs and strange words which reached his ears.

“Either because he thought he recognized Fatima’s voice, or because simple curiosity made him wish

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to clear the matter up, he tried the door of the closet.

“Unluckily for Fatima, due care had not been taken of the door, and he burst it open at the first attempt.

“The sight which met his eyes surprised him so greatly, that the tide of his fury was stemmed, and he seemed for a few moments to disbelieve his senses, and to be in doubt as to what to do.

“‘Traitors!’ he cried at last; ‘take the punishment your crimes and your hypocrisies have earned!’

“At these words, without heeding the supplications either of Fatima or of the Brahmin, who had flung themselves at his feet, he struck them dead.

“Frightful as the sight was, it did not distress me much. They had deserved death too well to call for pity, and I was delighted that so terrible a catastrophe should enlighten all Agra as to the real nature of two persons who had been looked upon as patterns of virtue.”

CHAPTER IV

WHEREIN SOME THINGS WILL BE SEEN WHICH MIGHT
WELL NOT HAVE BEEN FORESEEN

“ AFTER Fatima’s death, my soul took wing, and flew into a neighbouring palace where life seemed to be lived much as it had been in the one I was quitting. Below the surface, however, it was all very different.

“ It was not that the lady who lived there was on the threshold of that period when sensible women, even if they do not regard love-making as a vice, at least look upon it as ridiculous. She was young and beautiful, and one could not say that she trod in the paths of virtue merely because she was unfitted for love. From her unaffected modesty, from the care she took to hide her charities, from the peace which seemed to brood in her heart, one was bound to think that she was made to be what she seemed. Good without self-compulsion or vanity, she made neither a burden nor a virtue of doing her duty. I never saw her sad nor peevish for a moment: she was sweetly and serenely good, and did not consider that this gave her the right either to domineer over or to despise others. In this matter she was much more reluctant than those women who, conscience-pricked in everything, will allow nobody to be free from reproach. Her temper was naturally gay, and she did not try

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to curb her spirits. You see, she did not believe, as many do, that one is most respectable when one is most disagreeable to others. She libelled nobody, but was none the less amusing for that. Supposing that she had as many weak points as anyone else, she readily forgave the flaws she found in others. Nothing appeared to her vicious or criminal but what was really so. She was not like Fatima, who denied herself legitimate pleasures for the sake of enjoying illegitimate ones. Her house was not luxuriously, but generously, ordered. All the decent society of Agra was proud to be invited there; everybody was ambitious to know so rare a lady, and everybody held her in honour; so that, in spite of my perversity, I was in the end compelled to fall in with their opinion.

“When I first went to this lady’s house, I was still so full of Fatima’s perfidy that I had no doubt she did the same things as she; and at the beginning I did not distinguish between the woman of virtue and the hypocrite. I never saw a slave or a Brahmin come in without thinking that I should be made party to their concerns, and for a long time I was astonished at being left out of them.

“At length, the inactivity to which I was condemned in this house gave me the spleen, and sure that I should wait in vain if I waited in the hopes of seeing anything advantageous, I forsook this lady’s sofa, charmed to have been convinced that there were indeed such things as chaste women, but not much wishing to meet any more of them.

“My soul, to vary the scenes made available to it

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under the conditions of its life, did not, on leaving this palace, go to reside in another, but fluttered down into a horrid, dingy little dwelling, where I was doubtful even of finding a retreat. I crept into a dreary room, not even middling-well furnished, where, however, I was lucky enough to find a sofa, which, sullied and rickety, bore clear enough witness that it provided the other furniture of the room. That was the first idea that struck me, even before I knew where I was, and when I did know, I did not alter my opinion.

“This room, in fact, was the lair of a pretty enough wench, who, though by birth and nature what is known as ‘bad company’ nevertheless saw something of persons of what is called ‘the best’. She was a young dancing girl, who had just been admitted among the Emperor’s, and who had not yet made either her name or her fortune, although she was intimately known by nearly all the young bucks of Agra, to whom she was infinitely obliging in return for their promises of protection. Yet I doubt whether her fortunes would have changed so suddenly had it not been for a steward of one of the king’s estates taking a fancy to her.

“Abdul Atif was this steward’s name, and neither his birth nor his character made him a brilliant conquest. He was by nature boorish and coarse, and since making his fortune had added insolence to his other defects. It was not that he did not aspire to be well-mannered; but since he believed that such a man as he conferred an honour upon people by showing them respect, he aped the cold, dry politeness of

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some persons of rank, which in their case one is ready to call dignity, but which in Abdul Atif merely marked him as a highly impertinent dolt. He was born in the gutter, and he had not only forgotten the fact, but left no stone unturned to prove himself of illustrious descent; and he drew attention to this crowning absurdity by perpetually playing the lord. Inane and insolent, his familiarity jarred as much as his haughtiness; and, since he was vulgar and tasteless, his display only made him the more ridiculous. With little brain and still less education, he thought himself adept at everything, and was for dictating to everybody. Such as he was, however, he was borne with; for though he could do no harm, he could be of some use. The greatest folk in Agra were assiduously agreeable and flattering to him, while their wives were either on the footing of forgiving him his impertinences, which he carried excessively far, or of refusing him nothing. But although he was extremely run after in Agra, he was sometimes glad to escape from the importunities of women of quality, and to seek out pleasures which were not the less keen for being less dazzling, nor often (he was insolent enough to say) much more dangerous.

“One evening, on leaving the Emperor, before whom Amina had danced, this new protector took her home. His supercilious, freezing glance wandered over her dismal, mean abode, and he said, barely deigning to look at her:

“‘This place is not fit for you; we must get you out of it. It is as much for my sake as for yours that

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I want you to be better set up. I should be sneered at if a girl I patronized were not in the way to make herself considered.'

"After saying this, he sat down upon me, and roughly drawing her to him, unceremoniously took all the freedoms he wished with her: but as he was a libertine rather than libidinous, he was not very excessive in his use of them.

"Amina, whom I had seen disdainful and wayward with the lords who visited her, far from offering to be familiar with Abdul Atif, treated him with the greatest respect, and even durst not look at him unless he seemed to wish her to.

"'You suit me very well', he told her at last, 'but you must be good. No young men, right living, good behaviour: otherwise we shall not be friends for long. Good-bye, my dear', he added, rising: 'to-morrow you shall hear from me: your surroundings are not good enough for me to sup with you to-day; but I will see to it forthwith.'

"After saying this, he went away. Amina showed him out with all respect, and came back to fling herself upon me, and give way to her prodigious joy at her good luck. She reckoned up with her mother the diamonds and other rich ornaments she expected on the morrow from Abdul Atif's generosity.

"This mother, who, although she was an honourable dame, was yet the most complaisant of mothers, exhorted her daughter to act wisely in the midst of the good fortune it pleased Brahma to send her; and, comparing their present lot with that to come, made

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a thousand reflections upon Divine providence, which never abandons those who deserve its gifts. After that, she enumerated at length all the lords who had been Amina's friends.

“ ‘How little their friendship has been worth to you!’ she said to her. ‘And it is entirely your own fault! I have told you thousands of times, you are too good-natured. Either you allow them through sheer indolence to take you, which is a horrid vice; or, which is no better, and has made you a laughing-stock, you give way to your fancies. I do not go so far as to say that you should never please yourself, God forbid! but one should never sacrifice business to pleasure. Above all, you must never let it be said that a girl like you ever lets herself be carried away by love, and, unfortunately, you have given a handle to much gossip on that score. However, you are still very young, and I hope that all this may not have done you much harm. Nothing ruins people in your walk of life more than those madcap follies I have heard called *love gratis*. Once it gets about that a girl has contracted the unfortunate habit of occasionally giving her love for nothing, everyone thinks he can get it on the same terms, or at least very cheap. Look at Roxana, Elzira, Atalis: not a frailty to upbraid themselves with! Therefore Brahma has prospered their lives. They are not so pretty as you, but see how rich they are! Profit by their example; they are very sensible girls.’

“ ‘Oh, dear me, yes, Mother,’ Amina answered growing impatient at this lecture, ‘I will think of

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that. All the same you cannot expect me to reserve myself entirely for my present monster! That is impossible, I warn you beforehand.'

" 'To be sure, no', the mother answered. 'Where the heart is concerned one is not mistress of oneself: I merely say that you must give up these Court lords, unless you see them *incog.*, and they treat you better than they have so far. If you like, I will give them a talking to. You have Massoud, whom you love. I have nothing to say against your choice there: no one knows him; you can do anything you like with him. You pass him off as your cousin, and he is looked upon as such. You are safe there. This gentleman, who wants to be good to you, will be taken in like the others; if you are careful he will suspect nothing, and . . .'

" 'Do you think, Mother', Amina interrupted, 'that he is going to give me diamonds? Not that I am vain', she added, 'but when one belongs to a certain station in life, one likes to be like everybody else.'

" Thereupon she set to counting up all the wenches who would be wild at the diamonds and splendid dresses she would have: a vision which tickled her vanity more even than did her good luck.

" Early the next day a cart came for her, and my soul, being curious to see to what use Amina would put her mother's advice, followed her. She was taken to a pretty, well-furnished house, which belonged to Abdul Atif, in a bye-street. When we arrived there, I took up my abode in a superb sofa which had been put in a very decorated closet. I have never seen

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anyone so idiotically agape with admiration as Amina was at everything she saw. After she had carefully examined it all, she sat herself down at her dressing-table. The array of precious pomatum pots which met her eye, a casket choke-full of diamonds, well-dressed slaves obsequious to serve her, the merchants and artificers who awaited her commands, all these heightened her amazement, and intoxicated her with grandeur.

“ When she had somewhat recovered, she remembered the part it was suitable to play before such a large audience. She spoke haughtily to her slaves, impertinently to the merchants and artificers, chose what she wanted, ordered everything to be ready for her by the next day at latest, and, as a makeshift until she should possess all her destined splendour, attired herself in a magnificent chamber-gown, which had been made for a princess of Agra, but which she thought hardly fine enough for her.

“ She spent most of the day toying with everything she saw, and waiting for Abdul Atif. At last, towards evening, he appeared.

“ Amina flung herself at his feet, and, in the most abject terms, thanked him for what he was doing for her.

“ I, who till then had always been in good society, was astounded at the words which reached my ears. Of course I had often heard nonsensical things said, but they had at least been elegant, and uttered with that noble grace which almost makes it seem that they are not being said at all.”

CHAPTER V

BETTER TO OMIT THAN TO READ

BEFORE embarking on a longer conversation, Abdul Atif drew from his pocket a long purse full of gold, which he threw carelessly on to the table.

“‘Take hold of this’, he said to her. ‘You will not need it much. I will see to all your household and personal expenses. I have sent you a cook: he is the best cook in Agra next to mine. I mean to sup here often. We shall not always be alone. Some lords, friends of mine, and some choice spirits whom I lend money to, will come now and again. We will add some of your fellow-dancers, the prettiest of course: in that way we shall have some merry suppers, which I like.’

“While saying this he brought her into the closet where I was, and that respectable dame, Amina’s mother, who till then had been present at the conversation, withdrew and shut the door.

“I will not”, Amanzei interrupted his story to say, “give your Majesty an exact account of such a conversation, one in which Amina showed herself very tender, and animated almost to transports. Abdul Atif had taken care to tell her beforehand that he hated women to be pernicketty in their speech, so that, seeing how much Amina wished to please him,

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and knowing what her education and habits of life were, your Majesty can easily imagine that certain things transpired which it would be difficult to repeat to you, and which, moreover, would not take your fancy."

"Why not?" the Sultan asked. "Perhaps I should like them very much. Try a few."

"Try by all means", the Sultana said rising; "but as I am sure they will not amuse me, you will allow me to retire."

"There now!" the Sultan cried. "There's fine modesty for you! You think perhaps you can take me in? Rid yourself of that idea! I know all about women now, and, besides, I remember that a man who knows as much about them as I do, or nearly as much, told me that women love nothing so mightily as doing what is forbidden them, and that the only talk they like is talk they think they ought not to hear: therefore if you go out it is not that you really have a mind to. But let it be; Amanzei will tell me when I am put to bed all that you do not want him to tell me now. That will be just the way for me not to lose a scrap. Is not that so?"

Amanzei took good care to agree with the Sultan, and, after making the most of his discreet conduct, continued thus:

"When Abdul Atif and Amina had finished their interview, which was long and to the purpose, supper was served. Since I was not in the dining-room, Sire, I cannot tell you what they said to each other there. Although they had supped alone together, that did

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not appear to have contributed to their sobriety, and after some very undistinguished conversation, Abdul Atif fell asleep upon his lady's bosom.

"Amina, docile as she was, was at first not altogether pleased that Abdul Atif should treat her so cavalierly. Her vanity was sore at the small account he made of her. The high praise he had bestowed upon her for the way in which she had carried on her interview with him had swelled her pride, and made her think that she was worthy of the trouble it would give him to continue to entertain her. In spite of the consideration she was bound to show for Abdul Atif, she grew weary of the constraint he imposed upon her, and would impetuously have shown her irritation had not Abdul Atif, opening his heavy eyes, rudely asked her what o'clock it was. He got up without waiting for her answer.

" 'Good-bye', he said, fondling her roughly: 'I will let you know to-morrow if I am to sup here.'

"Having said this, he would have gone out; but, however much Amina may have wished to be left to her own devices, she thought she ought to try to keep him back, and carried her artfulness to the length of bursting into tears. He was inexorable, and freed himself from Amina's arms, telling her that, though he was glad to be loved, he by no means looked to be pestered.

"As soon as he had gone out she rang the bell, bestowing upon him, and only half under her breath, the names he deserved. While she was being undressed her mother came to whisper something to

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her. The news she told Amina made her hurry her slaves, and finally she ordered them to leave her alone. A few moments after her mother and the slaves had withdrawn, the former returned. She ushered in a clumsy negro, disgusting to look at, whom, however, Amina no sooner saw, than she ran to embrace him fervently."

"Amanzei", the Sultan said, "if you were to drop that negro out of your story, I do not think it would be any the worse for it."

"I fail to see how he spoils it, Sire", Amanzei answered.

"Then I will tell you, I will", the Sultan replied, "since you have not the wit to see it for yourself. The first wife my grandfather, Shah Riar, had, slept with all the blacks in her palace. In consequence of this, my said grandfather had that one strangled, and all the others that he had afterwards, up to my grandmother Sheherezade, who cured him of the habit. And so I consider it hardly respectful, after what has happened in my family, for people to come and tell me about blacks, as though they were no concern of mine. I will excuse you this one, since he has turned up, but I must ask you to bring no more in."

Amanzei, having begged the Sultan's pardon for his folly, went on thus:

"'Ah, Massoud!' Amina said to her lover, 'how terrible to have been two days without seeing you! What a hideous thing it is to sacrifice oneself to a career!'"

"Massoud did not say much to all this. However,

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he told her that, though he loved her with infinite delicacy, he was not sorry that she was the object of Abdul Atif's attentions. Later he adjured her to do everything proper to ruin him; and when he had submitted to the tempest of Amina's caresses, they began a kind of conversation to which spice was added by the thought that they were making a cully of Abdul Atif. Before he left her closet, she rewarded Massoud bountifully for the very great love he had shown her.

"She spent the greater part of the night with him, sending him away only when she saw daylight appear; and Amina's mother, who had let him in by a door which opened from her room into her daughter's, let him out by the same way.

"Amina spent the morning in trying on all the dresses she had ordered, and in ordering some more. She amused herself thus until it was time for her to go and dance before the Emperor. She was brought back by Abdul Atif: they were followed by some pretty colleagues of Amina, by some young omrahs, and three of the most renowned wits in Agra. They outvied one another in their praises of Abdul Atif's magnificence, his taste, his distinguished appearance, the subtlety of his mind, and the clarity of his outlook. I could not conceive how persons who, by birth or talent, held high rank, could forgive themselves for cringing, and lying so much in their eulogies. They did not even forego praising Amina; but, to say truth, it was in such a way as to make her feel that she was only secondary, and that if they had not wished to show deference to Abdul Atif, they would

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have treated her with as much familiarity as they were now studious to avoid. After flattering Abdul Atif, they scattered about the chamber, each man with whomsoever pleased him best. The conversation, according to the speaker, was between brisk and flat, and on the whole it seemed to me that they showed mighty little consideration for the ladies who were to sup in Amina's house, and that these were but little ruffled by such behaviour.

"At last they went down to supper. As there was no lair for my soul in the room where they ate, I could not overhear the remarks made there. To judge from those which preceded the supper, and from those which followed, one could bear the disappointment of not being within earshot.

"Abdul Atif, sodden with wine, intoxicated with the encomiums which the revealed excellencies of his cook had made still more high-flown and plentiful, incontinently went to sleep. A young man with an eye to his soon leaving Amina free to dispose of herself, actually dared to arouse him, to represent to him that such a man as he was, loaded with the weightiest business, and so necessary to the State, might allow himself pleasures as a relaxation, but should not become their victim. In the end, by proving to Abdul Atif how much he was beloved by prince and people alike, he convinced him that he could not delay going to bed if the stoutest pillar of the State were not to be endangered.

"He left, and everybody left with him. Some looks which I had intercepted between Amina and the

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young man who had so successfully harangued Abdul Atif made me suspect that I should soon see him again. She began to undress dully, as though nothing were in the wind, and, once rid of that superb raiment which impedes delight even more than it caters to vanity, gave orders that she was to be left alone.

“Amina’s respectable mother, won over, apparently, by the tale of woe the young man had poured into her ears (for I shall never believe so pure a soul can have been open to worldly interests), introduced him discreetly into her daughter’s room, and retired only after he had given his word of honour that he would say nothing to Amina likely to shock the modesty of so innocent and well-brought-up a young girl.

“‘Truly’, Amina said to the young man once they were by themselves, ‘I must love you very dearly to have brought myself to do this! For, when all is said, I am deceiving a worthy gentleman, whom, to be sure, I do not love, but to whom, all the same, I ought to be faithful. I am wrong: I feel it: but love is a dreadful thing, and what it is making me do to-day is very far from my nature.’

“‘I am all the more grateful to you’, the young man answered, trying to kiss her.

“‘Ah, that now!’ she answered, pushing him away, ‘that I cannot possibly allow you to do: sympathy, tenderness, the pleasure of seeing each other—I have promised you those, but if I were to go further I should be failing in my duty.’

“‘But my dear child, are you mad?’ the young man said; ‘what is all this canting talk of yours? I

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am ready to believe that you possess every imaginable delicacy of feeling, but how do you think that can serve our turn? Do you suppose I came here for that?’

“‘You were mistaken’, she pursued, ‘if you expected anything else of me. Although I do not love his lordship Abdul Atif, I have sworn to be true to him, and nothing on earth will make me break faith with him.’

“‘Ah, my little queen’, the young man rallied her, ‘since you have sworn, I have nothing more to say: that is highly respectable, and, merely for the rarity of the thing, I will allow you to remain true to your oath. Here! tell me! Have you taken many of that sort in your life?’

“‘You may scoff as much as you please’, Amina replied, ‘but all the same I am very strict.’

“‘Oho? well, I am not surprised’, he answered; ‘your sort of girls, the moment you begin to devote yourselves to the public good, pride yourselves on your strictness, and as a rule are much more scrupulous than honest women. But to come back to your oath, you might just as well have told me about it a little while ago, and saved me the trouble of coming to spend the night here.’

“‘That is true’, she replied in some confusion; ‘but you made me such brilliant offers that I admit they dazzled me.’

“‘So’, he asked her, ‘thinking about them has tarnished them?’ ‘Here’, he proceeded, pulling out a purse, ‘here is what I promised you; I am always as good as my word: there is something in

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that to ease your scruples with, and to release you from all the oaths you may ever have made. You will not deny that, at any rate.'

" 'What a tease you are', she answered, seizing hold of the purse. 'You know me very little. I swear, that if it were not for the inclination I feel for you . . . '

" 'Let us finish all that', he broke in. 'To prove to you how high-souled I am, I will dispense with your thanks, and even with that prodigious attraction you feel towards me: especially as it was not included in our bargain. I am even paying you as heavily as if I were the first string, and that, you know perfectly well, is not according to the rules.'

" 'It seems to me that it is', Amina replied. 'I am doing an abominable thing for your sake, and . . . '

" 'If I paid you only what the doing of that cost you', he interrupted, 'I guarantee I should have you for nothing. But, I repeat, let us have done: although you have as much wit as it is possible for anyone to have, this conversation is wearing thin.'

" Although he exhibited much impatience, he could not prevent Amina, who was prudence itself, from counting out the money he had just given her. It was not, she said, that she did not trust him, but that he might himself have made a mistake: in fact she complied with his desires only after she had made quite sure that he had not blundered in his arithmetic.

" When day was about to break, Amina's mother reappeared, and told the young man that it was time for him to be off: he was not entirely of her opinion.

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Although Amina begged him to take every care of her reputation, this consideration would not have budged him, and he would have stayed in spite of her entreaties, if she had not promised him in the future as many nights as she could filch from Abdul Atif.

“Beyond Abdul Atif, Massoud, and this young man to whom she sometimes kept her word, Amina, who had realized the importance of her mother’s sage counsels, received indifferently all those who found her beautiful enough to covet, provided, however, that they were rich enough to make their sighs persuasive. Bonzes, Brahmins, imans, cadis, men of every nationality, rank and age—none were denied. It is true that, since she had principles and scruples, it cost foreigners, especially those whom she looked upon as infidels, more than it did her own countrymen and men of her own faith. It was only the argument of money that could overcome her distaste, and, after she had given herself, override her remorse. On that point she even invented some very pretty rules. There were some cults which she held in greater abhorrence than others, and I shall always remember that, to win her kindness, it cost one infidel more than it would have cost ten Moslems.

“Either because Abdul Atif was too convinced of her honesty to think that Amina could be unfaithful to him, or because, with equal foolishness, he counted on the vows she had sworn never to belong to anybody but him, he stayed with her for a long while in perfect confidence; and, had it not been for an unlooked-for occurrence, which, however, is not without its

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parallel, it is clear that he would have dwelt in it for ever."

"I understand", the Sultan said. "Someone told him that she was unfaithful."

"No, Sire", Amanzei answered.

"Ah, yes!" the Sultan took up again. "Now I see that it was something quite different: it is easy to guess: he took her in the fact."

"Not at all, Sire", Amanzei went on. "It would have been lucky for him if he had got off so cheaply."

"Then I do not know what it was at all", Shah Baham said. "At all events those things are not my business, and I need not rack my brains to guess something which does not in the least concern me."

CHAPTER VI

NO MORE EXTRAORDINARY THAN ENTERTAINING

“THE fated moment had come when all the grandeurs, the diamonds and the riches Amina was mistress of, were to fade away from her sight. But at any rate, as a consolation for her loss, she could cherish the memory of a gorgeous dream: and, if we suppose that Abdul Atif too had dreamed, his experience had not been as enjoyable as hers.

“For some days I had noticed that Amina was less gay than usual; her house was barred at night, and during the day she saw no one but Abdul Atif. She had received many letters, and each one had deepened her melancholy. I lost myself in a maze of conjecture as to what could be the matter, and, not being able to discover anything, was witless enough to believe that a gnawing remorse was the sole cause of her evident sadness.

“Although what I knew of her character ought to have saved me from that error, I fell into it from the difficulty of finding out what her disquiet was due to. I was not long in discovering that I was astray in all that I had thought.

“One morning when Amina, weighed down with gloomy thoughts, was at her toilet, Abdul Atif came

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in. She blushed at seeing him; she was not used to being visited by him of a morning, and this unexpected appearance was not to her taste. She was so nervous and disturbed she hardly durst look at him. From Abdul Atif's horrid frown, from the terrible way in which he glared at her from time to time, it was not difficult to guess that he was much pained at some unpleasant notion, of which she was, apparently, the origin. Amina no doubt knew what it was, for she durst not so much as ask him. For some time he was dumb, but at last, full of raging irony, he burst out:

“ ‘You are a pretty creature, indeed a pretty creature! Extremely faithful, also. Zounds! my Indamora! Zounds! I will show you what goodness is; I will put you somewhere where you will have to behave yourself, for a while at any rate.’

“ ‘What is this I hear sir, pray?’ Amina answered him haughtily. ‘Surely you are not addressing yourself to a person of my quality? I beg of you to moderate your speech, please!’

“ Such insolence from a person in Amina's situation seemed so monstrous to Abdul Atif that at first it put him out of his stride; but at last, his rage getting the better of him, he heaped upon her all the contemptuous insults he considered she deserved. Amina began to justify herself, but Abdul Atif, who doubtless had undeniable evidence to back his case, roughly bade her hold her tongue. Amina was then convinced that this was no idle fury on Abdul Atif's part, but it seemed to her so impossible that she could be the

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cause, that she could not let well alone. She even saw fit to tax him in turn for his infidelities, and even to upbraid him upon his miserable taste in choosing his mistresses; and she added that she only mentioned these things because of her deep concern in anything that affected his person.

“Such barefaced impudence galled Abdul Atif so cruelly that he feared he would lose all restraint. Amina, seeing that he was not at all imposed upon either by her haughtiness or revilings, and fearing from some words he had let drop before that this scene might end tragically for her, finally had recourse to tears and fawning. It was all useless: nothing soothed Abdul Atif. I will spare you a description of him, but I have never seen a man so beside himself. Every minute wrought him to higher frenzies, in the course of which he would no doubt have smashed everything in the house, if everything in it had not belonged to him. This timely prudence held him back from making a grievous wreck of the place, which might have eased him; but the violence he did himself by his restraint only added fuel to his wrath against Amina. What incensed him most was that anyone could so cruelly fail in their duty towards a man of his standing. That alone was beyond his power to conceive.

“After giving vent to all the rude things which first anger and then vanity prompted, he laid hands wholesale on all he had given Amina. Realizing that he was throwing her over, she had now and again consoled herself by stealing a look at the diamonds

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and other moveables which she thought would still be hers; but when she found that Abdul Atif was intent upon stripping her of everything, she set up the most ear-splitting howls and wails. At that her mother came in, cast herself at Abdul Atif's feet again and again, and thought to soothe him greatly by swearing that the whole thing had been due to a cursed Bonze. But all she said about the Bonze seemed, on the contrary, only to make Abdul Atif more than ever set upon severity, and did not mollify him in the least.

“‘Alas!’ Amina’s mother concluded, ‘we are fairly rewarded for having trusted in an infidel! My daughter knows what I thought. I always told her it could only bring bad luck.’

“While these lamentations were proceeding, Abdul Atif, holding in his hand an inventory of all the things he had ever given Amina, had every thing restored article by article. That done, he said quietly to Amina:

“‘As for the money I have given you, you may keep it: it has not been my fault, my dear, that you have not had better luck. No doubt, being victimized in this way will make you more careful; I sincerely hope so. Now go!’ he added: ‘I have no more use for you here. You may thank your stars that I do not carry my resentment any further.’

“Having said this, he ordered his slaves to turn them out of doors, as little disturbed by the gross invectives they then hurled at him as he had been by the tears he had seen them shed.

“Curiosity to see to what use Amina would put her

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humiliation made me resolve, in spite of the nausea her way of life induced in me, to follow her back to the dingy hovel whence Abdul Atif had dragged her, and where she continued to hide her shame and sorrow at not having despoiled him utterly.

“ It was in this disgusting hole that I witnessed the regret and heard the imprecations of her virtuous mother. But the salvage of the fortune, by no means inconsiderable, at least provided some consolation for what they had lost.

“ ‘ Well, child ’, Amina’s mother said one day, ‘ is what has happened really so great a mischance? I agree that your late monster was the very soul of liberality, but is he the only man you can charm? Moreover, even if you never again find anybody so rich, are you in such a wretched plight as all that? No, child: quantity must make up for the lack of quality. If four men are not enough to replace him, you must take ten; more if necessary. You will argue, maybe, that that is a very happy-go-lucky plan, which is true enough; but if one never rises superior to anything, if one is afraid of everything, one will remain in poverty and in the shade all one’s days.’ ”

“ However ready Amina might have been to put these sage counsels into practice, the slough of despond into which she had sunk made it out of the question for her to do so as quickly as she might have wished. Her adventure with Abdul Atif had given her such a name for unreliability in business, that except for the faithful Massoud, whose love was proof against everything, I saw nobody at her house for a long time,

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except some of her colleagues, who, doubtless, came to see her the rather to enjoy her reverse than to comfort her affliction.

“But at last time, which obliterates all things, wiped Amina’s reputation clean. They thought her changed, or believed that the leisure she had had to brood over her past would have cured her of her passion for fickleness. The lovers came back. A Persian grandee, who at that time came to Agra, and was not familiar with its gossip, saw Amina, found her pretty, and became all the more headstrong about her as one of those obliging persons, whose sole business it is to work nobly for the pleasures of others, assured him that if he was lucky enough to take Amina’s fancy, his obligation would be the greater, since it would be the first frailty she would have to reproach herself with.

“Anyone else would have known this was impossible; the Persian merely thought it extraordinary. The novelty spurred him on, and, with the help of the irreproachable voucher for Amina’s chastity, he bought at the highest rate favours which were beginning to be valued at their lowest, and were even then not so often flouted as they should have been.

“Thus the dreary house Amina dwelt in was once more exchanged for a superb palace, glittering with all the riches of India. I do not know if Amina made a wise use of her new stroke of good luck, for my soul, repelled by the study of hers, went in search of objects worthier its attention, objects maybe as despicable at bottom, but which, more skilfully bedizened, revolted me less and amused me more.

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“ I flitted into a house, which, by its magnificence, and by the good taste which ruled in every part, I could see was one of those where I liked to reside, where pleasure and gallantry are always to be met with, and where the failing itself, in the garb of love, embellished with every possible refinement and elegance, is never seen except under the most attractive colours.

“ The mistress of this palace was charming, and by the swimmingness in her eye as much as by her beauty, I judged that my soul would find there the wherewithal for diversion. I stayed in her sofa for some time without her even vouchsafing to sit down upon it. Nevertheless, she was in love, and was beloved. Close pursued by her admirer, half self-persuaded, it did not seem likely that I should always be so indifferent an object to her as she seemed to assume.

“ When I came into her house she had already granted him permission to speak of his love; but, although he was agreeable besides warm in his suit, in spite of her inward surrender, he was far from success.

“ Phenima, such was her name, had a hard struggle to forego her virtue, and Zulema, too respectful to be bold, waited for time and assiduity to bring her to love him as much as he did her. Knowing better than he did what Phenima's leanings were, I could not conceive how he could be so blind to his happiness. It is true that Phenima never told him that she loved him, but her eyes never ceased to do so. Even if she

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spoke to him about some trifle, without her wishing it, without her even noticing it, her voice would grow cooing, and her turn of speech more glowing. The more tightly she kept a hold upon herself in his presence, the more she betrayed her love. Nothing in her suitor was indifferent to her; she was afraid of everything to do with him, and the people she least cared for were, to all appearance, more civilly treated than he. Sometimes she forbade him to speak, and straightway forgetting her command, pursued the conversation she had tried to close. Every time that he found her alone (and without designing it, perhaps, she gave him a thousand opportunities) the most tender and evident emotions took possession of her against her will. If, in the course of a long and animated conversation he should happen to press her hand to his lips, or fall on his knees, Phenima betrayed alarm, but no anger, and it was very gently indeed that she chid him for his temerity."

"And do you mean to say", the Sultan interrupted, "that he desisted?"

"Certainly, Sire", Amanzei answered. "The more he was in love . . ."

"The more he was an ass, that's plain", the Sultan said.

"Love", Amanzei answered, "is never so timid as when . . ."

"Pooh! Timid!" the Sultan interrupted once more; "there's a pretty story! Did not he see that he was tantalizing the lady? If I had been she, I would have sent him packing, I can tell you that."

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“No doubt”, Amanzei went on, “that had he been dealing with a flirt, Zulema’s case would have been hopeless; but Phenima, who really wanted not to be conquered, accounted her lover’s timidity for merit. Besides, the more he respected Phenima’s scruples, the more certain he was of victory. Not to seize the opportunity offered by a passing whim is perhaps to lose it for ever, but where true love is in the case, the less it is clutched at, the more eager it is to be caught.”

“All the same”, the Sultan said, “I have heard it remarked that women do not like men who are slow at grasping opportunities.”

“Sometimes, perhaps”, Amanzei answered; “but Phenima was not of their mind, and always loved Zulema most when he was even more respectful than she might have wished.”

“And”, the Sultan asked again, “did he often miss the chance?”

“Yes, Sire”, Amanzei replied; “and sometimes so egregiously as to make himself laughable. One day, for instance, he went in to see Phenima: for more than an hour she had been wholly given over to sweet thoughts of him, and, her imagination gradually growing more vivid, she revelled in her fond fancies, and was at the height of her disarray when Zulema reappeared. Her confusion increased, and she actually blushed at seeing him. Ah! if he had only guessed what it was that made Phenima blush! If he had only dared to plead! But he thought he was out of favour with her for some very innocent freedoms he

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had taken with her on the previous evening; and he wasted the opportunity when nothing could have given offence, in begging her pardon."

"Oh, the owl!" the Sultan cried. "How could anybody be such a dolt!"

"Still, that must not surprise you, Sire", Amanzei answered, "for during the time I was a sofa I saw more opportunities lost than seized. Women, trained from the cradle to hide their thoughts from us, are especially careful to hide their tender impulses; and many a one, perhaps, who boasts she has never succumbed, owes her advantage less to being chaste than to making others think her so.

"I remember that I was once for a long time with a lady renowned for her rare virtue, without seeing anything which belied her reputation in society. It is true that she was not lovely, and one must admit that no women find it easier to be chaste than those who have no charms. Besides her ugliness, this woman had a harsh, austere nature, at least as repulsive as her face. Although no one had been adventurous enough to try to soften her heart, it was none the less believed that it would be a waste of time to try. As luck would have it, a man more daring or more whimsical than usual, or perhaps he did not believe that women could be chaste, being alone with her one day, ventured to say that he thought her attractive; and although he said it so coldly as not to be in the least degree convincing, so unaccustomed a speech had its effect upon her. She answered modestly, but not calmly, that she was not made to inspire such

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feelings. He kissed her hand, she trembled; her confused look, her blushes, the fire which all on a sudden sparkled in her eyes, were undeniable earnestness of the tumults rising in her breast. Then he clasped her rapturously in his arms, vowing once more that she moved him most deeply. Seeing that her astonishment abated not at all, he proceeded to prove the truth of his statement; but her armour of modesty began to crack under the evidence, and, although I am quite ignorant of the nature of the proof he gave her, it ended by defeating her. Perhaps the very novelty of the situation disarmed her, or perhaps at that moment her virtue overburdened her, but in any case she hardly remembered that good manners called for at least a show of resistance, and she yielded even more quickly than women who are little given to resistance. This sample, and a few others of the same kind, have led me to suppose that unassailably virtuous women are few indeed, and that none are more easily won than those most foreign to love; but I must return to the two lovers whose story I was unfolding to your Majesty."

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH THERE ARE MANY THINGS TO FIND FAULT WITH

“ONE night, as he was leaving Phenima, Zulema asked her when he might see her again. Although she was very afraid of being with him, she could not live without seeing him, and thus, after some hesitation, told him he might come the next day.

“Phenima, fully alive to the danger she ran in being alone with him, had meant to invite some other friends; nevertheless, when the time came, she gave orders to be denied to all but Zulema. It seemed to her that when she had company, he made up for his inability to speak to her of his love by trying to show her, in a thousand different ways, that she occupied all his thoughts: and the world has such a nose for these things! She understood Zulema so well, and scandal might easily provide the world with that perspicacity she herself owed to love. Zulema was less dangerous for her when they were private, because then he was respectful, whereas before folk he was not careful enough: thus she believed she ought to see him in company as seldom as possible.

“Moreover, he was so melancholy when he could not speak to her. Would it not be too inhuman to

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deprive him of a pleasure which she had until then found so little risk in granting him?

"So Phenima had argued it out, or at least she thought she had, and thus she had convinced herself that the things she did, really out of pure love for Zulema, were based on custom, or something equally reasonable.

"That very day she had been extremely tempted to complete his happiness; she had weighed up every argument for giving a loose to love that a woman can who wishes to be converted: she had exaggerated the attentions and constancy Zulema displayed, his ever-eager desire to please her; she even remembered gladly that he had always avowed a preference for being sinned against rather than sinning in the matter of faithfulness. Besides, Zulema was young, intelligent, personable, which things she thought did not count with her at all, but which in him, none the less, had most captivated her."

"Then what the devil held her back?" the Sultan asked. "This woman makes me cross."

"Eight years' chastity", Amanzei answered; "an eight years' glory of which a momentary weakness might rob her."

"A fine loss indeed!" the Sultan cried.

"For a thinking woman", Amanzei answered, "the loss is more considerable than your Majesty thinks for. Virtue always goes hand in hand with a deep tranquillity; it is not diverting, but it is satisfying: a woman happy enough to have it, being always pleased with herself, can always look upon her life

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with complacency: her self-esteem is always justified by that others have for her, and the pleasures which she sacrifices are not as great as those the sacrifice procures her."

"Tell me just", the Sultan said: "do you think I would have been chaste if I had been a woman?"

"Really, Sire", Amanzei answered, boggling at the question, "I cannot say at all."

"Why cannot you say at all?" the Sultan asked.

"How can you ask such questions!" the Sultana put in.

"I am not speaking to you", the Sultan retorted: "I merely want Amanzei to say whether or not I should have been chaste."

"I believe you would, Sire", Amanzei declared.

"Then, my dear fellow, you are quite out", the Sultan replied; "I would have been exactly the opposite. But what I am saying", he added, turning to the Sultana, "is not meant to make you out of love with virtue: what I think about this is purely personal to myself, and very possibly, were I a woman, I should think quite the contrary: on this sort of question everyone is entitled to his own ideas: I do not want to influence anybody."

"Your master is getting entangled", the Sultana said to Amanzei, smiling. "And I promise you he will be highly obliged to you for going on with your story."

"There now, I like that", the Sultan exclaimed; "one would think it was I who had interrupted."

"Zulema came in", Amanzei went on, "and

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'Phenima, although he had come earlier than she expected, immediately told him that he was mighty late.

" 'Oh, how delighted I am that you should think so!' he said tenderly.

" It was only then that Phenima realized the force of her reproach; she tried to turn it off, and did not know what to say. Zulema smiled at her embarrassment, and the smile made her flush. He flung himself on his knees, and kissed her hand with extreme ardour: she was for taking it away, but as he made no attempt to keep it, she let it be.

" Meanwhile Zulema was whispering the tenderest things: she made him no answer, but she listened with an attention and eagerness for which she would certainly have blamed herself if she could have unravelled her feelings. Her bosom was slightly exposed; she noticed that his glance wandered there, and tried to fasten up her dress.

" 'How cruel you are!' Zulema cried.

" That exclamation was enough to arrest her hand. To allow Zulema the delight of the very small favour she granted him without his being able to draw any favourable augury from it, she pretended one of her locks needed settling. Zulema's eyes could not without glowing rest for long upon the object Phenima had abandoned to them. For a while she surrendered to the pleasure of being admired by what she admired; her eyes, cast languishingly at Zulema, grew large with emotion, and she appeared sunk in the tenderest dreams.

A M O R A L T A L E

“ Now to it! Zulema ”, the Sultan then said. “ But did he not see even that, the barbarous beast? ”

“ Phenima ”, Amanzei pursued, “ in spite of the disorder which was gaining upon her, noticed that of her lover, and, fearing Zulema’s emotion as much as her own, started up from her seat. He made some attempt to detain her, and, no longer able to speak, bathed her hand in his flowing tears, trying to bring her to see that he was cut to the quick by her cruel intent. So much regard brought Phenima’s emotions to a point, but, since love had not absolutely conquered her, she triumphed not only over her own desires but also over those of her lover, perhaps more dangerous for her than her own.

“ As soon as she had freed herself from Zulema’s clasp, she signed to him to get up, which he did. For a while they gazed at one another speechless. At last Phenima said that she wanted to play some game. Although the motion seemed ill-timed to Zulema, he could not thwart Phenima’s lightest wish, and got everything ready with as much alacrity as if it had been he who had wanted to play. This fresh proof of his enslavement touched Phenima deeply, and I saw that she was almost ready to beg his pardon for a whim which now appeared to her to be ridiculous.

“ Phenima’s repentance did not last as long as was needed to make Zulema happy, and the more she felt her strength was ebbing away, the more she thought she ought to hide her feelings from him. Thus she set herself to the game, but she soon grew so weary of it that she saw the armour she had chosen against

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Zulema was a very poor protection. However, she would not at once admit that it was her tenderness for him that made her so languid, and, attributing her heaviness entirely to the game she had chosen, besought her lover to fetch another: he did so with a sigh, which found an echo in her heart. The tumult of emotion which she thought to soothe, these dear fancies she tried to dispel, seemed to wax greater by the violence she did herself, and to tighten their hold upon her. Lost in reverie, she believed she was paying attention to the game, while she was conscious only of Zulema.

The agony she saw in his face, the deep sighs he fetched, the tears she saw ready to fall, and which only his profound regard for her seemed able to withhold, finally melted Phenima's heart. A prey to the tender palpitations he caused in her, she could do nothing but look at him. At last, either her own confusion or her inability to face Zulema's look, proved too much for her; she leaned her head upon her hand. No sooner did Zulema see her thus than he threw himself at her feet, an action Phenima was too taken up to notice, or not wishful to prevent. He took advantage of this moment of weakness to kiss her disengaged hand, and he kissed it with more rapture than an ordinary lover feels when revelling in the completest happiness.

"Crowned with a favour which, as their relations stood, he had not dared to hope for, he sought to discover his fate in Phenima's eyes. She still rested her head upon her hand; he raised it gently, and as

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Phenima uncovered her face, he saw it was wet with tears. The sight called forth answering tears from Zulema.

“ ‘ Ah, Phenima ! ’ he cried, heaving a profound sigh.

“ ‘ Ah, Zulema ! ’ she answered tenderly.

“ At these words they gazed at one another with that tenderness, that fire, that languishing, that wild ecstasy which love alone, and only the truest love, can provoke.

“ At last Zulema, his voice broken by his sighs, said in a transport of joy, ‘ Ah, Phenima ! if it be true that my love has at last awakened your passion, and that you are still fearful of telling me so, at least let those charmer’s eyes, those eyes that I adore, divulge the happy tidings.’

“ ‘ No, Zulema ’, she answered ; ‘ I love you, and could not be so mean as to lessen a triumph you have so well deserved. I love you, Zulema, my lips, my eyes, my heart, all of me must tell you, and all of me does tell you. Zulema ! my Zulema ! I am happy now that at last I can express all my feelings for you.’

“ Zulema thought he would die when he heard such soft and un hoped for words. But, though his rapture was excessive, he did not forget that Phenima could make him happier still. Though he understood that the foregoing declaration authorized a thousand things which until that moment he had hardly presumed to think of, his respect outweighing his desires, he chose to delay until she should be pleased to determine his fate.

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“ Phenima understood Zulema too well to mistake the motive which subdued his flame; she still gazed at him with extraordinary love, and yielding at last to the sweet impulses which mastered her, flung herself upon his breast with an impetuosity of fondness to which the strongest terms and the most flamboyant imagination could not do justice. What openness! what genuine passion! No! a more moving sight has never offered itself to my view. Both, intoxicated, seemed to have lost the use of their reason. Here was not the fleeting pulse of desire, but the true delirium, the soft fury of love, so often sought, so seldom felt.

“ ‘ Ye gods! ye gods!’ Zulema breathed from time to time, unable to utter more. Phenima, for her part, devoured by her love, clasped Zulema tenderly in her arms, tore herself away the better to gaze upon him, again enfolded him, again looked rapt upon him.

“ ‘ Zulema!’ she cried in ecstasy, ‘ ah Zulema! How long happiness has tarried!’

“ These words were followed by that delicious silence upon which the soul floats blissfully when words cannot express its exquisite feelings.

“ Zulema, however, still felt that much was lacking; and Phenima, whose flame at this moment made her feel an almost equal want, far from wishing to deprive him of a single, lightest joy, met him freely. It seemed even that it was he, and not she, who was making the greater gift: having resisted much, she thought she ought to show him how difficult it had been to resist at all, and compensate him for the

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tortures she had made him undergo for so long a time. She would have been ashamed to arm herself with that prudery which often allays, and even spoils enjoyment, and which, seeming to companion love with remorse, leaves a greater delight to be wished for even in the midst of delight. Phenima, loving sincerely, would have felt guilty towards Zulema had she in the least degree cloaked anything of the fierce passion he inspired in her. She seemed to forestall his every caress, and just as a few moments before she had prided herself on her resistance, so now her whole ambition was to convince him of her flame.

In one of those pauses, which short as they were, they filled with a thousand tender protestations, Zulema said ardently:

“ ‘ Phenima! you are too true to yourself in all your feelings for me not sometimes to have thought that you loved me: why did you so long delay telling me so? ’

“ ‘ My heart ’, Phenima answered, ‘ soon decided in your favour; but my reason long opposed my inclination. The more I felt myself capable of loving well and truly, the more I feared to embark myself upon the flood; never having loved, I felt that I should demand more affection than I could arouse. You alone have proved to me that there are still men who can love; you had shaken me, you had not yet conquered me. Shall I own it, Zulema? The chastity which it has given me so much pleasure to sacrifice to you to-day was your enemy for a long time. I could not without affliction think that one frailty would rob

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me both of the sweet knowledge that I was estimable, and of the joy of being esteemed. Ah Zulema! ' she added, pressing him in her arms, ' how hateful you have made to me all the time I have not spent in telling you how much I loved you. What! I, Zulema, I have been able to resist you! I have made you shed tears—they were not always such as you have shed to-day! Forgive me, I was far unhappier than you! Yes, Zulema, I will always upbraid myself for having been able to imagine that my every happiness was not bound up in you, and that in possessing you I was not possessed of all. You loved me, and yet I was able to think of the good opinion of others! Ah! Do I still deserve yours? '

"Your Majesty", Amanzei continued, " will easily divine how such a conversation was bound to end. Great as was the delight that it gave me, it is impossible for me to recollect the discourse of two lovers, who, enraptured with each other, asked each other questions they never waited to hear answered, and whose disconnected ideas, descriptive only of the disorder of their souls, could not have for another person nearly the charm it had for them. I was as much surprised by the boundlessness of their passion as I was by the expedients they devised to express it. They did not part until very late, and Zulema had hardly left her than Phenima, who had vowed every moment to him, sat down to write to him.

"Zulema came back very early the next day, still more in love, still more beloved, to enjoy the most delicious moments, either in Phenima's lap, or in her arms.

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“ In spite of my propensity to frequent changes, I could not resist my curiosity to know whether Zulema and Phenima would love each other long, and so I stayed in her house for nearly a year. But realizing at length that their love, far from getting less, seemed to renew itself more strongly every day; and that to all the delicacies and exuberance of the most ardent passion they added the intimacy and trust of the tenderest friendship, I went elsewhere to seek either my deliverance, or other pleasures.”

CHAPTER VIII

“ ON leaving Phenima’s palace, I repaired to a house in which, seeing only things so ordinary as not to be worth either looking at or telling about, I did not stay long. I was some days hunting about the different places where my restlessness and curiosity led me, before I found anything either new or likely to amuse me. In one place some person or another yielded through vanity: in others, whimsey, advantage, habit, or even indolence, were the sole motives of the frailties revealed to me. I met often enough with that lively, transient emotion, honoured with the name of taste; but nowhere else did I see that love, that delicacy, that sweet abandonment which, at Phenima’s, had so long been my admiration and my delight.

“ Tired of the wandering life I led, convinced that the emotion everyone would like to seem brimful of is, as a matter of fact, the rarest thing in the world, I began to grow impatient at my fate, and ardently to wish for the occasion which should put an end to my sufferings and my doom.

“ ‘What morals!’ I sometimes cried. ‘Oh, Brahma knew he was flattering my hopes with wind; he never thought that amid the frantic pursuit of pleasure all Agra joins in, and amid this widespread

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contempt for principles, I should ever find two persons such as are required to call me back to human life.'

"A prey to these melancholy thoughts, I flitted to a house where everything looked peaceful. It was inhabited by a solitary maiden-lady of about forty years of age. Although she was still well-looking enough to engage in an affair without appearing ridiculous, she was prudent, shunned bruted pleasures, saw few people, and even seemed to have tried not to gather an agreeable circle of acquaintance, so much as to live with persons who either by their age or callings seemed to shield her from all suspicion. Thus there were few houses in Agra duller than hers.

"Amongst the men who visited her, the one who seemed most agreeable to her, and who was the most often with her, was a person already middle-aged, solemn, cold, reserved, all by constitution rather than by discipline, although he was at the head of a College of Brahmins. He was a precisian, a hater of joy, and did not believe there was a single pleasure which would not smutch the soul of a true sage. From his moroseness and his gloomy features I first of all took him for one of those people who are more cross-biting than virtuous, unrelenting towards others, indulgent towards themselves, in public inveighing bitterly against the vices they nurture in private: in fact I took him for a whited sepulchre. Fatima had distorted my mind horridly with regard to people who looked so good and pure. Although I have seldom erred in thinking badly of them, I was mistaken in Mochles, and when I knew him I found he deserved

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to be better thought of. At that time he was upright, and sincerely chaste. Everyone in Agra thought more highly of him even than he wished: no one doubted but that his aversion from pleasure was real, and that, strict as his principles were, he had never strayed from them. Almahide, the name of the lady with whom I lodged, was equally well thought of. The close friendship between her and Mochles had given rise to no whispers against them; and spiteful as the world is with regard to friendships, there was no one but respected theirs, and believed it cemented by their common love of virtue.

“Mochles visited Almahide every evening, and, whether they were in company or alone, their actions were above reproach, their conversation blameless and temperate. Usually they argued some moral point, and in these discussions Mochles shone in learning and discretion. Only one thing displeased me: it was that two persons so superior to others, keeping all their passions within such strict bounds, should not have had enough pride to refrain from setting each other up as examples. Often, even, not satisfied with their mutual esteem, they would praise themselves with a complacency, a warmth and a vanity, which their better sense can surely not have approved.

“Although such a dull house became very tiresome to me, I decided to stay there a little while. Not that I hoped ever to see anything amusing there, or to find my freedom. The more I thought Mochles and Almahide capable of giving it me, the less I dared

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hope for a slip on their part: but still, tired with my wanderings, in horror at the cynicism to which the world had brought me, I was not sorry to listen to a little moralizing, though I do not know whether it was merely the novelty of the thing which made it pleasing, or whether I thought that as I then was it might not do me any harm."

"Ah, now I understand!" the Sultan cried. "I do not wonder at my growing drowsy all at once; I see what you are at. But so as not to tempt you to display either your eloquence or your powers of recollection ever again, I repeat the warning I was well advised to give you when you began to tell your story. If I were less merciful, I would let you go on, and, since you love the sound of your own voice so much, you would no doubt get rope to hang yourself; but I hate trickery, and I will impress upon you once more that nothing is worse for the health than talking goody-goody."

Amanzei went on: "In spite of the unusual virtue which dwelt in both Almahide and Mochles, they sometimes mingled with their moralizings some pictures of vice which were rather too detailed. No doubt their intentions were good; but that did not make it any the wiser for them to dwell upon thoughts which cannot be kept too far away if one wishes to avoid the troublesome feelings they usually engender."

"Almahide and Mochles, who did not realize their danger, or else thought themselves superior to it, were not cautious enough when they touched upon the tender passion: though it is true that after having

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vividly displayed its charms, they painted its shames and its dangerous side far too black. They were agreed, of course, that true felicity was to be found only in the lap of virtue, but they agreed to it without enthusiasm, as a truth too well known to need discussion. They were by no means so laconic in their researches upon love; they enlarged upon so interesting a subject, and stressed the most dangerous details with so much self-confidence, that at last I hoped they might some day be caught by it.

“For at least a month they entertained themselves with these lively descriptions I thought so little in tune with their character; and whatever subject they started off upon, they always fell back upon the one they should have avoided. Mochles, whose temper had insensibly been softened by these discussions, would come to visit Almahide earlier than usual, be more amused there, and go away later. Almahide, on her part, would await his coming more eagerly, take greater pleasure in seeing him, and listen to him more attentively. If, when Mochles came, he found someone with her, he appeared constrained and embarrassed, and she herself did not seem less so. When at last they were left alone, I could read in their faces the joy two lovers feel, who, after long enduring an importunate visit, can at last give a loose to their feelings. Almahide and Mochles drew eagerly together, complained of not being left more to themselves, and looked at one another with much satisfaction. They spoke in nearly the same terms as they had been used to do, but the tone was different.

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In short, they lived in a familiarity which could not fail to carry them further, inasmuch as they spun a little dangerously about the article from which their friendship had sprung, or which (I think the rather) they did not know much about.

“One day Mochles launched into a panegyric upon Almahide’s spotless character.

“‘As far as I am concerned’, she said, ‘it is not to be wondered at that I have remained chaste: to a woman, popular prejudice is a great help, but to a man it is a snare. In you it is a kind of stupidity not to be sportive; in us it is a vice to be so. You, for instance, though you praise me, ought yourself to be praised still more for thinking as I do.’

“‘Without examining things with that exact reasoning which shows them for what they are’, he answered pompously, ‘one might indeed think that I am more praiseworthy than you: but this would be wrong. It is easy for a man to stand out against love: everything prompts a woman to yield to it. If it is not affection, it is the flesh. Even if these two springs are lacking—though every day they give rise to myriad irregularities—there is always their vanity, which, for all that it is the least excusable reason for their frailty, is not perhaps the least usual: and what’, he added, sighing deeply, and rolling up his eyes to the heavens, ‘is still more dreadful for them, is the perpetual want of employment in which they idle away their lives. This fatal indolence breeds the most dangerous notions; the imagination, by nature evil, seizes upon and expands them. The passion,

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having taken birth, governs the heart more and more, or, if it is still free from disturbance, these voluptuous visions, so pleasant to consider, dispose it to frailty. When alone, and rapt on the wings of her imagination, a woman pursues a chimera her idleness has been father to; and, so as not to be made uneasy in her pictured enjoyment, she dismisses every pious thought which might make her blush at the creations of her fancy. The less real the seductive object is, the less she thinks she need resist it; it is in silence, and in her own company, that she is at her weakest: what has she to fear? But this heart in which she cherishes tender thoughts, these faculties which she moulds to the uses of love—will they always be satisfied with a shadow? Supposing that she is not desirous even of exposing her virtue to damage, can she be sure that when (perhaps just at the time when she is inwardly straying) a tender, ardent, eager lover pants at her feet, dissolved in passionate tears, she will find in a heart she so often allowed to drift on amorous seas, those principles which alone enable her to triumph in so dangerous a moment?’

“ ‘ Ah, Mochles ! ’ Almahide cried blushing ; ‘ how hard it is to practise virtue ! ’

“ ‘ You of all the world ’, he answered, ‘ have the least reason to say so ; who, with every charm to please, born to dwell in the midst of delights, have sacrificed all to this very virtue, which is nowadays sacrificed to things which ought to count least with it.’

“ ‘ I do not flatter myself,’ she replied demurely, ‘ that I have reached perfection : but it is true to say

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that I have been on my guard against everything, especially against that indolence you have mentioned, and those books, and profane shows, which cannot but relax the soul.'

" 'Yes, I know it', he went on; 'and it is chiefly to your continual care to busy yourself that you owe your integrity, for (and I see it in men) nothing delivers one into the hands of passion more than idleness. And if it has such an effect upon our sex, which is far stronger-minded, think how much more it must have on yours.'

" 'It is true', she said, 'that we have everything to struggle against.'

" 'Infinitely more than we think', he replied, 'as I was just saying. And besides, you must consider that it is always the women who are attacked (excepting those few without shame or principles, who, even without being in love, dare to be the first to say that they love), so that, as a rule, in spite of modern licentiousness, we do not have to hold out against the kindnesses, the tears, and the determination which we daily employ so successfully against women. Moreover, if you add to the devotion shown them, the example . . .'

" 'As to that', she interrupted, 'we have no advantage over you; example must tell with you, who are the aggressors, far more than with us.'

" 'That is not strictly true for all men', he pursued, 'since there are many whose position is enough to forbid that frenzy of the soul called the joy of loving: that, for instance, is my case.'

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“ ‘ Even if it were not so ’, she answered, ‘ born so lucky as to be impervious to passion, you would always . . . ’

“ Here Mochles cast up his eyes with a sigh.

“ ‘ How now ! ’ Almahide continued. ‘ Can you have something to reproach yourself with ? If you, Mochles, are not at peace with yourself, who else can presume to be ? What ! You have been inclined to love ? ’

“ ‘ Yes ’, he answered sadly. ‘ Such a confession humiliates me, but truth must have its due. It is, of course, true that I never yielded to this dire temptation. In owing to you that I have sometimes been obliged to struggle, I no doubt reveal myself to your eyes hampered by a weakness which, from your astonishment, I plainly see you thought me immune from. But in undeceiving you of an error which was to my advantage, I am fearful of increasing the good opinion you already have of me. It is less mortifying to be tempted than it is glorious to resist temptation. In avowing my weaknesses, I am obliged to tell you of my triumphs : what I lose on the one hand, I seem to wish to regain on the other : and I wonder whether I ought not to fear your attributing to pride a confession born only of my loathing for falsehood. ’

“ At the end of this modest speech, Mochles lowered his eyes.

“ ‘ Oh, you have nothing to fear with me ’, Almahide said promptly : ‘ I know you too well. What ! you have sometimes been fain to fall ? That does not surprise me. However much we may strive after perfection, we never attain it. ’

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“ ‘ What you say is unhappily only too well proven ’ ,
he answered.

“ ‘ Alas ! ’ she cried dolorously, ‘ do you suppose I have so much to boast of, and that I am free of the weaknesses you accuse yourself of ? ’

“ ‘ What ! ’ he said to her ; ‘ you also, Almahide ? ’

“ ‘ I have too much faith in you to hide anything from you ’ , she went on. ‘ And I will confess that I have had to struggle terribly. What has long amazed me, and which even to-day I cannot understand, is how this disorder which takes possession of our feelings, to their confusion, can be out of our control. A hundred times it has come upon me unawares in the midst of the most serious duties, and one would naturally think the soul would be less accessible at those times. Sometimes I resisted successfully enough ; at others, less strong against it, in spite of myself it bent my will, inflamed my imagination, and enslaved all my faculties. That these shameful tendencies should master a soul that likes to harbour them, and which is only happy when it is under their yoke, that does not surprise me ; but why is one left at their mercy when one always takes every care to smother them ? ’

“ ‘ What one calls being good ’ , Mochles answered, ‘ consists less in not having been tempted, than in being able to resist temptation ; and there would be little virtue in piety if there were no obstacles to surmount. But since we are upon the subject, tell me, pray, now that you have reached the age when the blood flowing more temperately in the veins makes

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you less subject to vagrant thoughts, do you still have these outrageous impulses?’

“ ‘ They are not so common ’, she told him; ‘ but I am still liable to them.’

“ ‘ That is also my case ’, he said smiling.

“ ‘ But we are mad to talk as we do ’, Almahide said blushing. ‘ This is not at all the right sort of conversation for us.’

“ ‘ I think, all things considered, we have not much to fear from it ’, Mochles answered with a complacent smile. ‘ It is right to mistrust oneself, but it would also be to have too poor an opinion of our character to think ourselves so easily undermined. I grant that the subject we are upon must needs give rise to certain thoughts, but it is one thing to discuss with a view to enlightenment, quite another to do so with intent to seduce. And I think we can, in all good faith, rely upon each other’s motives, and be at rest about them. Besides, you must not think that things which are upsetting to people who lead dissolute lives have the same effect upon us: by themselves they are innocuous: people of the greatest purity are sometimes forced to consider them, without even the most minute discussion of such matters having the least effect upon their blameless behaviour. All is evil and corruption to corrupt hearts, just as the things which seem most contrary to chastity have no hold upon those who do not seek to indulge them.’

“ ‘ There can be no doubt of that, if you think so ’, she replied; ‘ and I should not dream of being scrupulous where you think I ought not to be.’

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“ ‘ You will never guess ’, he said to her, ‘ what the curiosity is which burns me; I dare not reveal it, because that would be too indiscreet in me: and yet I cannot resist the temptation. I would so much like to know if anyone has ever made proposals of a certain kind to you, if ever, in fact (to give my curiosity full rein) you have ever experienced the passionate outbursts of a man, either with, or against, your will? ’

“ Almahide was thunderstruck at this unexpected question; she blushed, and fell into a muse: at last, taking the plunge, she stammered out:

“ ‘ Yes, indeed, and since you must know, I will own without reserve, that one day a rash young fellow, who (you see, I am hiding nothing from you) in spite of my aversion from men seemed to me agreeable enough, catching me alone, said an abundance of those fine things to me which men think it their duty to say to us before we have reached that happy age which calls forth only their respect, and while we are miserable enough to have faces which incite them to attack. We were alone: I answered him according to the maxims I had prescribed for myself. But my answer, far from making him desist, made him suppose not that I was seeking to avoid his embraces, but that I was making my surrender a more considerable triumph for him: he durst even assure me that I loved him; you may well imagine that I stoutly maintained the contrary. I do not know what women this young coxcomb usually frequented, but certainly they had not taught him to respect them. He came to me, and clasping me brutally in his arms, flung me

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upon a sofa. I beg of you please to spare me the rest of a story which it would wound my feelings to tell, and which might still disturb my serenity. Let it be enough for you to know . . .’

“‘No!’ Mochles broke in; ‘you shall tell me everything: it is, I see (and I do not see it without trembling for you) not so much the fear of stirring your passions or of wounding your feelings which closes your mouth, as the shame of confessing how deeply tempted you were: and this motive, far from being praiseworthy, cannot be too harshly reprehended. I can, I even think I must, add to what I say; that if it be true that you fear the story I demand of you will move you too much, you cannot suppress it or palliate it without incurring guilt. Is it of no concern to you to be unaware of the power certain ideas have over you? Can you presume to be sure of yourself if you have never put yourself to the test? In this way, by continually flattering your soul, you will never know its weakness. Almahide, take my word for it, we are never fearful enough of the dangers we are strangers to, and it is usually through over-confidence that we fall. Thus you cannot be too particular over every detail of your story. It is only from the effect each passage has upon you now that you will be able to judge what progress you have made along the path of virtue: or (what is more essential still) what is still left in you to root out before you can reach that complete aversion from all joy which alone makes people virtuous.’

“In the mouth of Mochles this doctrine surprised

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me not a little. I knew how upright and enlightened he was, and I could not conceive what could now make him argue in a way so contrary to his principles. 'What!' I said to myself in amazement; 'this is Mochles, the virtuous Mochles, advising Almahide to dwell upon details which may wound her modest feelings, and incline her to ill-doing?' The curiosity I felt to discover his motives made me scrutinize him earnestly, and I found his eyes glowing so strangely that I began to think that I might well gain my freedom in the last place in the world I would have dared hope for it.

"Whilst I was enraptured by such sweet expectations, founded doubly, first upon the virtue of Almahide and Mochles, then upon the confusion beginning to gain upon both of them, Almahide continued her story."

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH YOU WILL FIND AN IMPORTANT POINT TO SETTLE

“ ‘ I WILL obey you blindly ’, Almahide told Mochles; ‘ you have convinced me that it was only vanity which made me silent, and I shall chastize myself for it by telling you, without veiling anything, the most mortifying details of my story. I told you, I think, that the young man in question flung me backwards upon a sofa: and, before I could recover from my surprise, he flung himself upon me. Although my unbounded astonishment hindered me from expressing my anger, he read it plainly in my eyes, and wanting to guard against my crying out, he succeeded, in spite of my resistance, in stopping my mouth with the vilest of kisses. It is beyond my powers to describe how greatly I was revolted at first; nevertheless, I must confess I was not indignant for long. Nature, which was giving me over into the hands of the enemy, soon bore the kiss to my innermost heart; and suddenly my wrath was abated by intermingling impulses. All my senses were stirred, an unknown fire rushed through my veins, some strange delight which urged me on although I hated it, by little and little flowed over my soul; my shrieks were changed into sighs; I was carried away by feelings which, for all my rage and

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my grief I could no longer battle against; and even while I bemoaned my condition, I had no strength for self-defence.'

" 'Ah, what a horrible situation!' Mochles cried. 'Well—and then?' he continued, with eyes aflame.

" 'What shall I tell you?' she went on. 'Whenever I could I reproved him, but only by rote. I believe that I spoke to him, and treated him, with all the scorn he deserved: I say that I believe I did, I dare not vouch for it. As my disorder increased I felt my strength and my anger dwindle away; my mind was in a fearful chaos. But still, I had not yet surrendered—but how feebly I resisted! Oh, Mochles, I cannot remember this without horror; and the shame it brings back to me makes it all as vivid as if I were still moaning in the arms of that audacious lover. What a critical moment for my chastity! Oh, Mochles, knowing the whole value of the innocence he sought to make me lose, and even in the midst of my confusion fearing nothing so much as the misery of losing it, how could the pleasure be such a pleasure? How is it that such lively terrors did not swamp the pleasure, or why did the pleasure yet have the upper hand over my virtue? I wished (but with what an effort did I wish it, and how much against the grain!) that someone would come and rescue me from my impending fate. And even while I formed the wish, a contrary wish surged violently through me, and yet displeased me less than the first, which was a hope that nothing should hinder my undoing. Blushing at what I felt,

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I burned to feel yet more. Without being able to imagine further delights, I longed for them, until my ardour began to torture me, and to wear me out. But, though I was far gone in this delirious whirl, I had not yet been able to still the importunate voice which cried out from the depths of my heart, and which, not having been able to strengthen my weakness, continued to reproach me for it, when the young man, noticing no doubt how my feelings were being worked upon, carried his outrage to the farthest point. He . . . but how can I put into words what I blush to think of? Solely engaged, as much as my confusion would allow, in repelling the kisses which he ceaselessly showered upon me, I was not prepared in other respects. In spite of the pitiful state I was in, this fresh insult reawakened my anger; alas! not for long. I soon felt my disorder increase. The very efforts I made to break from the clutches of the audacious fellow did but help to bring about my fall. Finally, lost in ineffable bliss, in raptures of which I can give you no idea, I fell limply, devoid of strength, into the arms of the cruel man who offered me such gross indignity.'

" 'How terrible!' Mochles cried; 'and how I dread the sequel!'

" 'Yet it was not what you suppose', Almahide answered. 'At the crisis of a situation which I needed to fear all the more since I no longer feared anything, I do not know why, but my enemy suddenly desisted from his attempts, and the tumult in him died down. By a miracle I have never been able to fathom, and

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which you may not perhaps believe, it is so extraordinary, at the very moment when I could no longer have refused him anything, and when he himself seemed at the utmost pitch of uncontrol, his eyes, glowing with a lustre which affected me more than I could bear, changed. A kind of languid look drove the madness out of them; he relaxed, and folding me in his arms more tenderly, less violently than before, he became (just judgment for the wrong he had done me) as limp as I was myself. At that moment my own confusion began to abate and I was happy in being able to enjoy the abjection of my foe: after having let my eyes dwell upon him with all the pleasure in the world, and having inwardly thanked Brahma for the protection he had manifestly thrown over me, I tore myself forcibly from him. The calmer I grew, the clearer my mind became, the more bitterly did I feel my shame. Twenty times I opened my mouth to upbraid the temerarious man as he deserved, but the inner confusion which still dominated, shut it again every time; and, after having looked upon him with all the indignation his insolence demanded, I left him abruptly. To tell you the truth, I chose rather to be silent than to go into details which would have driven the blood into my cheeks, and which the frailty I had recognized in myself made me afraid of. That', she concluded, 'is the only time I have been in the danger I had always dreaded without knowing what it was, and which I have known only to take more care than ever to avoid. I thought myself the more obliged to shun it, no longer doubting from the

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emotions I had felt, that I had a greater propensity to love than I thought for.'

" 'You see', Mochles then said, 'how important it is to put one's soul to the test. But, *à propos*, how does yours now? Has telling this story had any alarming effects upon you?'

" 'Well, really,' she answered blushing, 'it is not so calm as it was.'

" 'So that', he took up, 'if some bold fellow were to appear now, you might be a little shaken?'

" 'Ah, do not even suggest it!' she cried. 'That would be the worst misfortune that could happen to me.'

" 'Indeed', he answered in agitation, 'I can well believe it.'

" Saying this he became extremely pensive: from time to time he glanced at Almahide as though stupefied, while his eyes were full of desire and irresolution. Almahide's avowal of her perturbation encouraged him; but, not knowing in his inexperience how to take advantage of it, it came near to being wasted. How he ought to proceed to seduce Almahide was not the only thing which engrossed him. Restrained by his past integrity, lashed by his desires, now giving way, now resisting, I saw he was ready either to flee or to hazard all.

" While he was involved in these struggles, Almahide was far from feeling easy. The story Mochles has forced her to tell had released all the feelings she was afraid of. Her eyes were alight; a red different from that of shame, interrupted sighs, restlessness,

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languor, all these told me, better than she knew herself, how deeply she was moved. I waited impatiently to see the outcome of a situation in which two such discreet persons were entangled. I even feared for a while that they would see the pitfall towards which their too great sense of security had led them, and that with hearts too well trained in the paths of virtue they would not fall into it so readily as my own state and Brahma's promise forced me to wish.

“ At last I thought I could see by the looks in the eyes of Almahide and Mochles, which momentarily became less timid and more plainly spoke their desires, that it was less their fear of succumbing which held them back than ignorance of how to bring about their fall. Both seemed equally tempted, both seemed to me to have the same wishes, and the same need to satisfy their curiosity. Such a situation would have given no trouble to persons with a trifle of social skill; Almahide and Mochles, far from having an inkling of the art of mutual aid, durst neither declare their condition, nor, except by the clumsiest of glances, reveal the flame which seared them. Even if they had known that their thoughts marched together, would they have known what point they had reached? What shame would overwhelm the first to speak if he found any dregs of virtue still left in the other's heart! And how enlighten each other when both had such good cause to be dumb? Even supposing Almahide to be frailer than Mochles, she yet had to await his overtures. The coyness and propriety of her sex,

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added to the chastity she had always professed, did not allow her to make a declaration; and though the rule is not considered inviolable by all women, Almahide, being either a novice, or at least unversed in dalliance, feared the scorn rightly incurred by taking such a step. Besides, could she be sure how Mochles would take it? Perhaps if she had felt certain that Mochles needed to despise her before he could take her, she might have worked up to this rashness: but what if he stopped short at despising her?

"After they had debated within themselves, for some time, how they might speak without exposing themselves to the shame of a failure, Mochles, whose pride and position would have received too cruel a bruise from an outright avowal, thought that sophistry would be the best way: provided, however, that the choice of means should still rest upon what his clearer reason might have to say to it; and that he should not bewilder himself by his own sophistry, nor use it to save his face in case of the failure of the attempt, but only to deceive Almahide with. How much better it would have been to use all this ingenuity, not to seduce, nor to justify seduction, but to protect himself."

"Egad!" the Sultan remarked, "if he goes awkwardly about the business, one cannot say it is from lack of thinking about it."

"But", the Sultana said, "I cannot see why you are so surprised at his thinking it over so long: it seems to me that his situation called for a few reflections."

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"A few, by all means", the Sultan retorted; "and it is precisely because only a few are wanted that he had no call to make so many. Those people must have been horribly tempted not to recover themselves in all the time they took about it."

"You have narrowly escaped making a judicious remark", the Sultana said.

"Narrowly escaped!" the Sultan cried. "May I venture to ask what you mean? You have some little habits of speech which lack respect as much as any I have heard, and which perhaps no other Sultan in the world would bear with."

"I merely mean to say", the Sultana answered, "that it leads one astray. The dizzy ideas which engaged Almahide and Mochles ran through their minds with great rapidity: and if you would think of it for a moment, you would see that those things which Amanzei has taken a quarter of an hour to tell us would not delay their actions more than a couple of minutes."

"Well then", the Sultan replied, "the story-teller must be an ass who takes so long to say what his people thought so quickly."

"I should be glad", she answered, "to see you do as much for us."

"I have good reasons for thinking that I should acquit myself very well", he said. "But I should do even better; for what I found so hard to describe I should make no bones about leaving out."

"The thoughts in which Mochles was floundering, his desires, the efforts he made to smother them, the

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pleasure it gave him to indulge them, made him look so serious and distracted that at last Almahide judged it proper to ask him what ailed him to be silent so long.

“ ‘I fear’, she added, ‘you are giving way to gloomy thoughts.’

“ ‘You are right’, he exclaimed; ‘and they arise from the story you have just told me.’

“ Almahide seemed astonished to hear this.

“ ‘Do not be surprised’, he continued; ‘and do not be unduly shocked at what I am going to tell you, extraordinary as the words may seem in my mouth. I am deeply grieved that the rash coxcomb who had so little regard for you did not have time to consummate his outrage.’

“ ‘Ah, Mochles!’ she cried out, ‘Why? why?’

“ ‘Because’, he answered, ‘you would then be in a position to calm the doubts which have tortured me for so long, and which you have stirred to the depths in me, and which our common ignorance will always exacerbate, for you will not be able to answer my questions, and it would be too dangerous for me to put them to any person other than yourself. My curiosity wanders over things which are strange and unnatural to a man of my character and known convictions, and unless others knew me as well as you do, they would not fail to fasten discreditable motives upon me.’

“ ‘But surely’, she said, ‘you can tell me everything without the slightest risk of that.’

“ ‘It is just that’, he went on, ‘which nearly makes me wish that you knew all about it; for having as

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much confidence in me as I have in you, you would certainly hide nothing from me. Even if I had doubted of your friendship, and of how far you trusted my discretion, I should have been convinced by the frankness with which you have confessed your most intimate feelings to me.'

" 'At least let me know what troubles you', she answered. 'Perhaps by dint of reasoning we shall discover. . . .'

" 'No, no!' he interrupted, 'it would only be guess-work; and the question which troubles me is of the kind which demands the utmost certainty. Without alarming you further, I will tell you what it is, and you will tell me whether, thinking as I do, I ought to be satisfied with such profound ignorance upon a capital point. Moreover, your interests and mine are the same in this, since, seeing how virtuous you are, you must needs be tormented by exactly the same doubts as I am.'

" 'You frighten me,' Almahide told him: 'I implore you to speak.'

" 'Well', he said, 'I think it may be possible that we deserve very little credit for having never strayed from the path.'

" 'Can that be!' she cried, nettled that the conversation should take so serious a turn.

" 'No doubt of it', he pursued. 'And I will convince you. You, yourself, have never known the sweets of love (for, whatever you may think, there can be no doubt that what happened to you with that young man can have given you only a very poor idea

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of them); and as for me, I have always shunned them: can we argue from that that we are so perfect? But, you say, we have had desires, and have vanquished them. Is that so glorious a victory? Did we know what it was we hankered after? Can we be quite sure that we felt those desires? No! our pride has imposed upon us: what we took for the most burning desires, were, no doubt, very trifling temptations. It may well be that sheer ignorance misguided us: Heaven be praised if it were so! But if it be true (as I greatly fear) that the mere wish to magnify our victories, or even to think we had won any at all, has deceived us on this point, in what a culpable error have we not passed our lives! We have flattered ourselves with being virtuous, while we were perhaps more imperfect than those we dared censure, and thus our vanity may have loaded us with one more vice than they had.'

" 'That,' Almahide said, 'is a very true and very humiliating thought.'

" 'It is not merely from to-day that it tortures me', he resumed sadly; 'all the more that, to cure me of my doubts, I see but one way, which, simple as it is, is not the less dangerous for being so.'

" 'Yet tell me what it is', she begged him; 'for as I am in exactly the same state as you; I am intensely anxious to hear what your idea was.'

" 'It is only because I know you as well as I do', he replied, 'that I am not afraid to tell you. You and I think ourselves chaste; but, as I told you just now, we do not really know what this implies, and I

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will convince you of it. In what does virtue consist? In denying ourselves the things which most delight the senses. And who can tell which things most delight the senses? Why, he who has tried them all. If to enjoy pleasure is the only way of getting to know what it is, he who has not experienced it cannot know. What then can it be that he denies himself? Nothing—a chimera; for what other name can we give to desires for a vague, unknown something? And if, since we grant that, the only value of self-denial lies in its difficulty, what virtue can there be in denying oneself a phantom of the mind? But having abandoned oneself to pleasures and finding them delicious, then to renounce them, then to immolate oneself, there is the great, the only, the true virtue, which neither you nor I can boast of possessing.’

“‘I see it only too clearly,’ Almahide said. ‘It is manifest that we have nothing to boast of.’

“‘Yet we have done so’, Mochles went on rapidly, fearing that, if he gave Almahide time to consider, she would see through his false reasoning. ‘We have presumed to think so, and at that moment we have been guilty of pride. I am very glad,’ he continued, ‘and I heartily congratulate you on it, that you see that so long as one is not in a position nicely to compare virtue and vice, one can have no very adequate notion of either. Besides (for this evil, great as it is, is not the only one), we are forever plagued by the desire to find out what we obstinately determine not to. The soul, in spite of herself absorbed by this curiosity, surely neglects its other duties on account

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of it: a prey to frequent distractions, in reasoning, illuminating, following up, analysing, searching deeply into its conceptions, it loses the time which, without this tormenting, ever-observing notion, it would apply solely to the practice of virtue. If it knew what to think of what it wishes to know, it would be more tranquil, nearer perfection: it follows, therefore, that we ought to have an acquaintance with vice, both for the sake of more equably pursuing abstract virtue, and of being sure of our own.'

"Although Almahide was in such a state as hardly to be able to grasp the argument which, in proving the necessity for pleasure delivered her from the terrors of remorse, this sophism made her shudder: for a few moments she remained dumbfounded; but the desire she had, either for enlightenment as to the mysteries of love, or to bathe in them once more, carried the day against her fears, and in the end she seemed to be more pleased than frightened at what she heard.

" 'You believe then', she asked him, in a voice which trembled, 'that we should be the more perfect for it?'

" 'Upon my honour', he declared, 'I have no doubt of it: for I pray you, consider the position we are in, and tell me if there is a more deplorable one.'

" 'I see it only too plainly', she said; 'it is truly appalling.'

" 'In the first place', he went on, 'we do not even know if we are virtuous; a melancholy pass for people who think as we do. This doubt, bitter as it is, is not

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the only misfortune consequent upon our situation: it is only too certain that, satisfied with our self-imposed privation, there are a thousand things, even more essential perhaps, we have considered ourselves exempt from having to study; in consequence, sheltered by a virtue which may well be but a shadow, we have committed real crimes, or (and this, though not of the same importance, nevertheless has considerable drawbacks) we have omitted to perform good works. Finally, supposing even that we were what we have hitherto believed ourselves to be, I should still suspect such a virtue as we have assumed, and would not believe there was much merit in possessing it. Let a man have his choice of burdens, and it is certain that he will shoulder the lighter of the two.'

" 'I follow you', she said with a sigh: 'you mean that we have done the same thing. Oh! how many scruples you arouse in my breast!' she went on, casting down her eyes: 'and how can one not be tortured by them when the only means to rid oneself of them arouses as many more?'

" 'The means', he took up rapidly, 'is really less to be feared than one thinks. Let me suppose (and would to Heaven that I had not to suppose it!) that weary of uncertainty, feeling, in fact, that it is our duty to dispel it, we desired to experience pleasure and judge of its charms for ourselves: what real danger would there be, in this trial, of our not being able to use it as a staff once we have made it? For feeble souls, I grant, there might be a risk; but it seems to me that, without too great presumption, we

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can a little rely upon ourselves. If, to hide nothing from you, if, as I imagine, this pleasure is less entrancing than it is said to be, it will give us no pain to do without a thing which, rightly or wrongly, one gains so much glory in depriving oneself of. If, on the other hand, it is as profoundly disturbing to the soul as we are assured it is, how much greater joy shall we get from our privations in knowing how superlative a merit our denial is!'

"This reasoning, which would no doubt have revolted Almahide had she been more in possession of herself, had upon a soul which only waited for the shadow of an excuse to succumb, all the effect the wretched Mochles had hoped. After she had gazed on him for a while with troubled and irresolute eyes, she said to him:

" 'I feel the necessity for this experiment as much as you do: but with whom could we safely carry it out?'

"As she said this she leaned languidly over towards Mochles, who had by little and little come so close to her that by now he held her in his arms.

" 'I believe', he answered her, 'that if we wanted to try it, it would have to be between ourselves: we are sure of each other, and as we can have no doubt that it is only in a close pursuit of chastity that we decide upon an action which seems to be injurious to it, we are sure that we shall not make a habit of an instinct of curiosity which springs from such laudable principles. Indeed, whichever way it may turn out, we shall be the gainers, since at least the memory of our fall will save us from sinful pride.'

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"Although Almahide did not answer, she still seemed to waver; Mochles, who wished at any price to bring her over, proposed to her, to conclude the conquest, to make this experiment only by degrees, so that then, he said, they could desist if in their first approaches they found enough rapture to determine their doubts. She consented. Soon they were in full stream, and, sharpening their desires by actions, which though gracelessly and awkwardly performed, inflamed their senses none the less for that, they soon forgot the bargain they had struck. Both of them, finding perhaps too much, perhaps too little account in what they felt, either thought it proper to proceed, or could not stop, and then . . ."

"And then you straightway became something else?" the Sultan interrupted.

"No, Sire", Amanzei answered.

"Then I don't understand at all", Shah Baham went on. "And I also know why: the thing is all fiddle-faddle, for it is obvious that they were everything your Brahma required."

"I thought at first just as your incontrovertible Majesty does", Amanzei replied; "yet of necessity one of them must have deluded the other."

"I imagine that you were devilish vexed", the Sultan answered. "And tell me, which were you most suspicious of?"

"Almahide's story", Amanzei replied, "made me very doubtful of her; and the ignorance which she pretended when she gave herself to Mochles, though absolute, did not prevent me from thinking that in

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telling her story she had suppressed the circumstance which held me prisoner still."

"There's women for you!" the Sultan cried. "Oh yes, to be sure your notion is the right one. Well, I did not say anything, but I would have laid odds that she did not tell the whole story: if I had boasted about it, there are plenty of people here who would have accused me of trying to be a cynical wit. There there now, take my word: it was she who prevented your release."

"Very probable as it is", Amanzei answered, "there are certain difficulties. Mochles, for a man hitherto so irreproachable, did not seem to me to want experience."

"That alters the case", the Sultan said; "for . . . Oh yes! now it is quite plain; it was he."

"But do at least make up your minds", the Sultana said. "It was she, it was he! Why not, without all this pother, believe that both of them were liars?"

"You are right", the Sultan answered. "Strictly speaking it might be so: all the same I think it would be more amusing if it were one or the other. I cannot tell why, but I should prefer it that way. At any rate let us hear what they said afterwards: that is the most interesting point now."

"Mochles was the first to recover from his delirium: he seemed at first, astonished to find himself in Almahide's arms, and, his mind asserting itself by degrees, horror followed close upon the heels of astonishment: he did not seem able to grasp what he saw: he tried to doubt his eyes, and to beguile himself into thinking

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that some dream alone could show him so shocking a sight. At last, only too convinced of his misfortune, he sadly turned his glance within himself, and going back step by step over all he had done to seduce Almahide, remembering how his criminal passion had blinded her and with what art he had by little and little corrupted her, he fell into the most woeful despondency.

“Almahide at last opened her eyes also, but, still under the sweet influence, did not see things so clearly as Mochles: at first she was bewildered rather than afflicted. At length, either that the despair she saw written upon him made her sensible of her fall, or that she realized of her own accord all that she had to reproach herself with, she burst into tears and wailed out:

“ ‘ Oh, Mochles! You have undone me! ’

“Mochles owned to it: he accused himself of having seduced her, lamented over her, tried to comfort her, and spoke to her, as a man really humiliated might do, of the danger of trusting oneself too far. At last, having said all that the deepest sorrow and the most sincere repentance can prompt, without daring to look at her, he took his parting from her never to see her more.

“Left to herself, Almahide was as much ashamed and upset as he: she spent the whole night in weeping, and in blaming herself for everything, down to the last reproach she had uttered against Mochles, finding that there was too much of vanity in it. The next day, Mochles shut himself up in the most austere seclusion . . .”

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"That settles it, to my mind", the Sultan interrupted. "It was not he."

"And Almahide", Amanzei continued, "as inconsolable as ever, followed his example a few days later."

"Well, that puts me out", the Sultan took up again; "then it could not have been she. I never came across a more puzzling question in my life, and let him unravel it that can."

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH, AMONG OTHER THINGS, YOU WILL FIND A
WAY OF KILLING TIME

“WHATEVER taste for morality I may have acquired by living at Almahide’s, I was beginning to be sick of it by the time Mochles seduced her. Another day of it, and I should have left, in the belief that there were in Agra at least two women not amenable to love; luckily my patience saved me from that error.

“After leaving Almahide, I wandered aimlessly for a long time; absurdities or vice of a kind already known to me holding out small prospect of pleasure to me, I was careful to avoid all houses which seemed decent and regular. My ramblings led me into a suburb of Agra which was full of very ornate houses, and the one I fixed upon belonged to a young lord who did not live there, but sometimes came there *incognito*.

“Towards the evening of the day after I had settled there, I saw mysteriously arrive a lady whom, from her splendour, and still more from her aristocratic air, I took to be a woman of the highest rank. My eyes were dazzled by her charms, for, with still more radiance than Phenima, she had the same modesty, and so sweet a face that I could not look at her without being warmly interested in her. From the way in

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which she entered the closet where I was, it seemed as though she were confounded at the step she was taking; she trembled as she spoke to the slave who showed her in, and, without daring to raise her eyes, she came to sit upon me in a pensive muse, but all so languorously that it was not difficult to guess what emotion it was that occupied her thoughts.

“ Scarcely was she left alone with her cogitations, which were of the saddest, than she sighed two or three times, and tears welled from her lovely eyes. Nevertheless, her sorrow seemed tender rather than painful, and she seemed to weep less at misfortune than from the fear of it. She had hardly dried her tears when a handsome young man, superbly dressed, came dashing into the closet with a song upon his lips. His appearance completed her confusion; she blushed, and turning her eyes from him, and hiding her face in her hands, she tried to conceal from him how perturbed she was.

“ As for him, he came towards her in the least sympathetic but most coxcomby manner, and throwing himself on his knees cried :

“ ‘ Ah, Zephis! do my eyes tell me true? Can it really be Zephis whom I see here? Is it you? you whom I adore, and whom I barely dared hope to see here? What? is it you I at last hold in my arms? ’

“ ‘ Yes,’ she answered sighing, ‘ it is I, who ought never to have come here; it is I, dying of shame at being here, but who yet was not afraid to come.’

“ ‘ How dear you make this secluded spot to me! ’ he cried, kissing her hand.

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“ ‘ Ah ! ’ she replied, ‘ and how much regret may it not cost me some day ! The proofs of frailty which I hereby give you will become the bitterer to me as they fade from your mind, as fade they will, Mazulim ; or, if you sometimes remember them, it will only be to despise me for what I have done for your sake. ’

“ ‘ What nonsense ! ’ he answered banteringly. ‘ How can a person so beautiful as you think such fantastic things ? Do you know that I have really never loved anyone as tenderly as I love you ? And yet you doubt my feelings ! ’

“ ‘ No ’, she sorrowfully replied, ‘ I have not even the pleasure of doubting : I know that you can love neither long nor faithfully ; I doubt even if you know what love is. Nevertheless, I love you, I have told you so, and I have come to this place to tell you so again. I feel the whole extent of my weakness ; I pity myself for it, I see all the consequences, and yet I am led. My reason makes me see all I have to fear : my love makes me despise the danger. ’

“ ‘ But truly, ’ he answered, ‘ do you know that you do me a mortal injury in not believing in my affection for you ? ’

“ ‘ Ah, Mazulim ! ’ she cried, ‘ is it thus that you feel all that I am sacrificing for you ? Is it thus that you reassure my trembling heart ? I love you, Mazulim ; if you knew me better you would be sure of it. This heart which adores you has never (and you cannot but know it) belonged to anyone but you. Tell me that you wish it to do so ever ! If you knew how much I need to think you love me, you would

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not refuse to tell me you do, if only out of humanity. My happiness now depends upon you only; to see you and to love you always is my only felicity and my only wish. Can it be true that you are incapable of feeling for me what I feel for you?’

“ ‘ Ah! ’ he cried, ‘ I protest . . . ’

“ ‘ Mazulim ’, she interrupted, ‘ leave your protestations to me; I shall manage them better than you, and I am more eager to believe you love me than you are to persuade me of it.’

“ ‘ I swear to you, Madam ’, he said in a voice that was solemn rather than moved, ‘ I did not think that in the six months I have tried to mark my affection for you I had so little succeeded. I know, of course, that a great love such as I have been fortunate enough to inspire in you is never without a grain of mistrust: if that which you show for me hurt me only ’, he added, folding her in his arms, ‘ I would complain much less of it, and my delight at your delicacy would make me forget how unjust you were; but it is your own peace of mind which is in question here, and, if you read my feelings better, you would have no difficulty in believing that your serenity is much more precious to me than my own.’

“ As he finished these remarks he tried to take the tenderest liberties with Zephis, but she checked him so sincerely that he could not think that with her it was merely that formal coyness of which nobody takes any notice nowadays. He looked at her in astonishment.

“ ‘ What! Zephis ’, he asked her, ‘ is that the way

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you show your affection for me? Was I to expect such coldness?’

“ ‘Mazulim’, she answered weeping, ‘please listen to me! I did not come here without knowing what I was to expect, and you would see me shed fewer tears if I had not made up my mind to give myself to you. I love you, and, if I were to follow only the dictates of my heart, I should be in your arms now. But, Mazulim, there is time enough, and we have not yet been committed to each other so long that you ought to have to hide your feelings from me. At any time I should be crushed to hear that you did not love me, but think how much I should have to reproach you with, think what a state I should be in, if I discovered it only after my frailty had left you nothing more to wish for! Urged on by the desire to please, accustomed to fickleness by the successes which no one denies you have had, you only want to conquer, not to love me. Perhaps you laid siege to me without having the least passion? Inquire well of your heart; you are the master of my fate, and I do not deserve that you should make it a miserable one. If anything less than the most heartfelt love draws you to me, if, in a word, you do not love me as I love you, do not be afraid to tell me so. I should not blush to be the prize of love, but I should die of sorrow and shame if I thought I was merely a prey to wantonness.’

“Although neither these words, nor the tears which accompanied them, had the least effect on Mazulim’s heart, they made him speak to her less indifferently than he had before.

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“ ‘ How your fears move my heart ! ’ he said. ‘ But how little I deserve to have been their cause ! Can you possibly imagine that I see no difference between you and those despicable wretches who, until to-day, have alone seemed to engross me ? I confess that my way of living may have given ground for your suspicions ; but, Zephis, would you really have wished me to add to the absurdity of spending my idle hours with these women, that of loving them into the bargain ? It is true that I have dreaded love ; well, how could I have laid better plans to escape it for ever than by living with women without morals or principles, who, even while they seduced me by their attractions, saved me from love by their natures ? I am, you say, accustomed to fickleness by success. Do you think so meanly of me as to suppose I was proud of any of my victories once I had seen you ? There is not a single one of these victories of which you think me so vain that has not inwardly revolted me. There is not one, in fact, which I would not give my blood not to have won, since they make me less worthy of you. ’

“ At this Zephis seemed a good deal comforted, and stretched out her hand to Mazulim, gazing at him with her glorious eyes full of that melting softness of expression which love alone can give.

“ ‘ Indeed, Zephis ’, Mazulim went on, ‘ I love you, oh how dearly ! How glad I am to feel, seated at your knees, that even in the most ardent transports it was not really to love that I offered homage. How blessed it is for me to know this, and to know it through you.

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Without your charms, without your virtues I may say, I would always, no doubt, have missed that feeling to which, until I met you, I refused to give way. It is to you alone that I owe it, it is through you alone that I want to be possessed by it for ever.'

" ' Ah, Mazulim ! ' she cried, ' how happy we should be if you really believed what you say ! If you really love me now, you will always love me. ' "

" In saying this she bent over Mazulim, and, taking him gently in her arms, brought her head near his. Her eyes swam in tender exaltation, and soon Mazulim, by his passionate response, dissolved her very soul. Ye gods ! what eyes she had when he had raised them to the zenith of confusion ! I have never seen any like them, save Phenima's.

" Although fully prepared to make Mazulim the happiest of lovers, she could not see him so near his bliss without remembering her fears, and perhaps her virtue also.

" ' You have no doubts as to my love for you ', she said, offering but the slightest resistance to him, ' but can you not . . . ' "

" ' Ah, Zephis ! ' he broke out, ' Zephis ! can you still be afraid of giving me a proof of your affection for me ? ' "

" Zephis sighed, and answered nothing : overcome rather by her love than persuaded of his for her, she yielded, at last, to his desires. Too happy Mazulim ! what beauties revealed themselves to his eyes, and how much the shyness of Zephis added to their worth ! Indeed, Mazulim seemed to me to be very much

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struck; everything astonished him; all in Zephis was the theme of a eulogy, and subjected to a kiss. Although, far from blaming him for being overwhelmed with an admiration which I shared with him, this procedure seemed to me, for that stage in his affairs, to drag out too long, and even to suspend, if not to obliterate, his desires.

“It is perfectly true that the more refined one is the more one delights in trifling. Fine feeling alone is cognizant of those tender side-issues which it invents, and continually varies; but to tell the truth, one cannot be content with them for ever, and if one lingers over them it is the rather to rein in one’s desires than to find new fuel to feed one’s flame. For some moments I thought highly enough of Mazulim to attribute his inaction to an excess of love, and Zephis’s charms made the pretext colourable. Most likely Zephis also thought so, and for longer than I did. I could not conceive how the transports of a lover, so eager to be happy, could grow more tame as they found the more to excite them. He was brisk without fire, profuse in praises, constant in admiration; but has a lover no other way to express his desires than by praises?

“Although Mazulim concealed his difficulties with great artfulness, Zephis noticed the ill-success of her charms. She seemed neither surprised nor horrified, and, turning her beautiful eyes upon her lover, she said, with the softest smile:

“‘Get up; I am more lucky than I supposed.’

“On hearing this, which seemed to him nothing

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less than insulting, Mazulim made every effort, but in vain, to prove to Zephis that he did not deserve the opinion she seemed to have of him. At last, forced to admit his humiliation, he said to her in a voice which made me laugh:

“ ‘Alas! Madam; you damped my spirits so much.’

“ ‘Your distress amuses me’, Zephis answered; ‘but your grief would offend me. It would hurt me too much if you thought my heart was wounded . . .’

“ ‘Ah, Zephis!’ Mazulim interrupted, ‘how dreadful it is to be in the wrong with you, and how difficult to excuse oneself!’

“ ‘Take it no more to heart’, Zephis answered tenderly. ‘I believe you love me, indeed I came to believe it only a moment ago, and I cannot have a better proof of your affection for me than the very thing you blame yourself for.’ ”

“ Oh, that, as the saying is”, the Sultan remarked, “is all very fine as claptrap; but at the bottom of her heart the lady was certainly nettled. In the first place, that sort of thing is in itself disappointing, and what, apparently, disappoints every woman cannot possibly amuse any one of them; or at least you will agree that in that case she must be very fanciful. Besides, when it comes to a case of this sort, fine feeling is not so great a consolation as you might think. By the way, I remember that once (I was young, egad! very young) there was a woman. I will not tell you how it came about; all the same we were both of us . . . Really, I would never have suspected it; but there,

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all on a sudden . . . I hardly know how to put it. Well then! It was in vain that I said the most lover-like things to her; the more I said, the more she blubbered. I have never seen such a thing before or since, but it was certainly very moving. Nevertheless, I told her, among other things, that one must not give up hope, that I had not done it on purpose. . . .”

“Come, finish your heartrending tale!” the Sultana broke in.

“There’s a nice thing now!” Shah Baham retorted. “*I’m* not allowed to tell a story, in my own house too! From that, as I was telling you, I concluded, once and for all, that there are no women who do not get a certain degree of pleasure from it: therefore, Mazulim’s lady, who was given to saying such fine things . . .”

“Would have been as well pleased if she had not had to say them”, the Sultana put in. “That is likely; but let me tell you that what you think so grievous for a woman embarrasses her more than it grieves her.”

“Ah, yes!” the Sultan went on. “For instance, I would only have to . . . but do not be afraid! Go on, Emir.”

“Although Mazulim was much put out at his misadventure, he seemed still more astounded at the way Zephis received it.

“‘If’, he said, ‘anything could console me for this frightful disgrace, it is seeing that it has had no effect upon your heart. How many women would hate me if they had this against me!’

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“ ‘ I confess ’, Zephis answered, ‘ that I would perhaps do the same if I could attribute this accident to your coldness; but if, as you have told me, and as I believe, it is love alone which brings your faculties to a standstill, this adventure is only something a thousand times more flattering for me than all your ravings. I love you too much not to believe that you love me. Perhaps also I am too vain ’, she added with a smile, ‘ to think that it is in any way my fault; but, whatever the cause of my indulgence may be, it is at least true that I forgive you. I warn you of one thing more, that I would be less calm at the least hint of your unfaithfulness than at what you call a crime. Yes, Mazulim, be true to me, and I do not care if I always find you as you are at present. What I lose in the way of what you call pleasure, shall I not find again in the certitude of your faithfulness? ’

“ While Zephis was speaking, Mazulim, who would have wished to be under a less obligation to her, spared no pains to be free of his misfortune. Zephis lent herself to his wishes with a good nature which he likely did not at all appreciate inwardly, since every minute gave him less excuse. Her complaisance became ever more sympathetic; it increased by little and little. Zephis protected herself less; she granted with a better grace; her eyes glowed with a fire I had not yet seen in them; it was as though she had not until then surrendered, but had only suffered Mazulim’s ardours. That repugnance which always accompanies the first moment, which so many women act but so few feel, had passed away. Zephis was

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unembarrassed by Mazulim's praises, and seemed even to wish he could give her fresh ones: the blood flew to her cheeks, but not from modesty; her eyes no longer avoided what had at first seemed to hurt them; the pity which Mazulim at length made her feel was boundless; nevertheless . . ."

"Oh, yes", the Sultan remarked; "nevertheless . . . I understand perfectly. What a rascally man! I know of nothing which in the long run is so insufferable as Mazulim's procedure with Zephis; I am quite sure that she got annoyed."

"And I", the Sultana said, "am quite sure that she did not: to be annoyed at such a misfortune is to deserve it."

"Splendid!" the Sultan retorted. "Do you suppose a woman would make such a nice distinction? All I am sure of is this, that in a like case I should be annoyed, and I would not think the less of myself for it, not I. At any rate, let us hear what Zephis did say; for, as far as I can see, in this as in everything else, everyone has his own taste."

"Indulgent as she was", Amanzei went on, "it seemed to me that her lover's continuance in that state began to vex her: either that having done more for him than at the first time she thought she deserved it less; or that, being herself now more favourably inclined, she was able to find fewer arguments for bearing with it."

"Mazulim, not so sure of his defeat as Zephis was, or perhaps used to outfacing such situations, had not such deference for Zephis as he should have had, and

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attempted what, with more policy or more politeness he would not have done. It seemed to me that she was displeased at what he wanted to do, less from the presumption of it than from the indignity it offered her charms.

“ In spite of her painful feelings, she gave a shrewd smile, as though to let Mazulim know that she was not a person with whom this boldness was well placed, or could succeed. Certain that he would soon bring his own punishment upon him, she lent herself to his ridiculous endeavours with a courage every woman is proud to have in such a case, but which is not with all of them justified by success. Although Mazulim was not now in quite so pitiable a condition, he was not yet in one to be congratulated upon, and, great as his efforts were, Zephis was right not to have been afraid of them.

“ From Mazulim’s astonished expression I was forced to believe that, if he was accustomed to a part of what had happened, he was not so to women who, like Zephis, would provide no resources for him in his difficulties. May I be guiltless of wishing to offend any of them; and besides, how can one tell whether it is always they who are to blame?

“ However it may have been, Mazulim’s surprise was so ludicrously portrayed, and, by throwing odium on other women, so flattering to Zephis, that she could not help laughing.

“ ‘ If you had asked me about it’, she said, ‘ I could have told you how it would be—but perhaps you would not have believed me.’

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“ ‘Evidently I would have been wrong’, he answered, ‘but I could not in the least expect it to turn out so. A continuously happy experience of ten years made me suppose that what I vainly attempted with you would always give good results. Ah! Zephis’, he added, ‘must I find in what ought to crown my desires only fresh food for misery?’

“ ‘Indeed’, she answered laughing, ‘I can understand how unhappy you feel, and you must also be quite sure how much I pity you.’

“ ‘Zephis!’ he continued in a more sincerely passionate strain than I had yet heard in him, ‘only your charms are equal to my affection. Every moment increases my love and my despair; and I feel . . .’

“ ‘Come, Mazulim!’ she interrupted, ‘what after all would have been the delight you so much deplore missing? No; if it be true that you love me, you are not to be pitied. A single look from me ought to make you happier than the joys you seek, if you have ever found those with another person.’

“ ‘Your feelings charm me, and go straight to my heart’, he said; ‘but in doubling my love, they increase my regrets and my grief.’

“ ‘Let us waive this topic’, Zephis said, getting up.

“ ‘What’, he cried, ‘do you wish to leave me already? Ah! Zephis, do not leave me alone in my terrible despair.’

“ ‘No, Mazulim’, she answered, ‘I have promised to spend to-day with you. Ah! may it not seem longer to you than it does to me! But let us leave this room; let us go and enjoy the delicious coolness of the even-

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ing, dissipate your melancholy, and turn your mind from things which perhaps sadden you. Mazulim, the more we are bent upon pleasure, the less we enjoy it; let us try, by being less intent upon it, to be better fitted for it.'

"As she ceased speaking, generous Zephis left the room, and Mazulim gave her his hand with the utmost obsequiousness.

"What is so curious is that Mazulim, who turned his assignations to such poor purpose, was the most run-after man in all Agra: there was not a woman who had not been, or who did not wish to be, his lover. Lively, amiable, flighty, ever a deceiver, but not for that finding fewer to deceive, all the women knew him for what he was, yet all sought to find favour in his eyes: in short, his reputation was astonishing. They believed he was . . . what did they not believe him to be? And yet, what was he? How much did he not owe to the discretion of women, for whom he was such a bad bargain, and whom he treated so ill?

"After strolling for an hour, Zephis and he came back from the garden. I at once tried to read in their eyes whether they were happier than when they had gone out. From Mazulim's downcast appearance I thought not: nor was I wrong. Zephis sat down carelessly upon me, and Mazulim sank at her feet upon the tiled floor. Having little to say to her, and being able to think of no kind of amusement he was in a position to give her, he sank into a muse, looking at her very tenderly. A little later, ashamed of the figure he was cutting before the most beautiful woman

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in Agra, but still in consternation at his misfortunes, afraid that in trying to retrieve them he would sink deeper still, he did not know how to proceed. At length he was frightened that his silence and coldness would seem to Zephis to betray indifference rather than repentance. He snatched her in his arms, and, giving her the most passionate kisses, seemed to want to lift himself by some sudden bound from the profound sluggishness in which he was sunk. At first Zephis seemed to deliberate whether she would lend herself to Mazulim's fresh enterprise. If her sympathy prompted her to grant him everything, this same sympathy made her realize with sorrow that she was never more cruel to Mazulim than when she refused him nothing. Did he really want to succeed, or did he know her so little as to suppose that she would be hurt if he did not try to? In fact, was it love or vanity which urged him to this renewal?

"While she was thinking this over, Mazulim (either that he was merely trying to extricate himself from a position which vexed him, or that, being adept in the little fripperies of love, he wanted to save Zephis from tedium) thought he would resort to those nothings which are charming at the beginning or the end of a conversation, but which, on account of their frivolity, cannot be a substitute for it. At first Zephis refused to be a party to them; but, believing in the extreme eagerness with which Mazulim begged more compliance than she was inclined for, she consented out of pure generosity, and with a shrug of her shoulders at what he thought so highly of, and from

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which, to do him justice, she expected far less result than he did.

"Her prolonged inattention, to use a mild word, far from annoying Mazulim, spurred him to still greater exertions, and being the greatest proficient of his day in the trifling things of love, he forced her to take notice: from notice he brought her to interest: the unreality of what he offered her gradually effaced itself from her mind: she even furthered the illusion he fabricated for her, and in the end found out how much the pleasures depend upon the imagination, and how trivial a thing nature would be without it.

"To crown their bliss, that which Mazulim had looked upon the rather as a kind of compensation he owed Zephis than a help for himself, had a stronger effect upon him than he had hoped for. The charms of Zephis, more moving than ever, made him feel the emotion he had until then so fruitlessly sought, and, in the sweet confusion which began to suffuse his senses, having forgotten his woe or being incited rather than depressed by it, he at last overcame all those bitter obstacles which had hitherto so cruelly impeded him."

"That is something like, now!" the Sultan cried. "Better late than never; you mean that . . ."

"Do not go and explain that to us, I beg", the Sultana interrupted. "You must realize that Amanzei has had the discretion, or the subtlety, to leave us something to guess at."

"I know nothing about it", the Sultan went on. "That sort of thing is not my business; but, you

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see, the fact is, as you know as well as I do, that this fellow Mazulim was a little liable to accidents, and it seems to me quite natural to ask . . . because, maybe, perhaps . . . Anyhow, clear it up a little: Mazulim . . . ?

“Sire, he was in luck’s way; but he was better qualified to wound than to heal the wounds he had given, and I doubt whether his petty reparation would have won him forgiveness if he had had to do with anyone less generous than Zephis. Imbued with vanity rather than with love, he seemed to me to care less for the pleasure of possessing Zephis than for the relief it gave him to have less to blush for in her presence. They entered upon a tender conversation wherein Zephis displayed a deal of feeling, and Mazulim uttered a deal of high-falutin’ flummery.

“A little later they were served with a supper which was the last word for refinement and taste. Zephis, made ever gayer by her lover’s presence, overflowed with delicate and passionate sayings, which made me admire her mind as much as her heart. Although he was himself astonished at so much charm, it did not have so much effect upon him as it did upon me, and it seemed to me that his pride was elated by his conquest of Zephis, rather than that his heart was touched by the ardent yet delicate passion which she felt for him, and which, in spite of her fears of his fickleness, swayed her completely.

“If the possession of Zephis had not inspired him with as much love as it ought to have done, at least it had increased what he had: his heart, incapable of

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real feeling, still repined: all Zephis's virtues, which the ungrateful brute praised without appreciating, and perhaps without believing in them, far from drawing him to her, seemed to repel, and make him uncomfortable. I could not see that he was ever in the least touched by the true and tender love she had for him, but she began to stir his desires. He looked at her rapturously; he sighed; he spoke to her passionately of the delight she had given him, and seemed to await the end of supper with much impatience. He even said as much; but either she was enjoying it, or she did not think so highly as he did of the virtues of after-supper time, and was less impatient. Nevertheless, she loved him; soon he entreated her. . . . Ah! Mazulim, what a lucky dog you would have been if you had known how to love!

"A little later Zephis went away, and Mazulim followed her, loud in protestations of love and gratitude, which I believed the less sincere as they were the more deserved. Zephis was too good for him to be faithfully attached to her: she was sincere without pretence or coquetry; Mazulim was her first affair; but what would have constituted happiness for any other man was for that corrupt heart but a bond in which he found neither pleasure nor diversion. All he needed was those women who, born without feeling or self-respect, have dozens of adventures without having a single lover, and whose indecency would make one suppose that they seek for dishonour rather than for delight. It is not to be wondered at that Mazulim, who was nothing more than a fatuous ass,

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pleased women of this stamp, and that he, in his turn, sought no company other than theirs."

"But Amanzei", the Sultana asked, "how could such a worthless fellow have appealed to such an excellent creature as you have made Zephis out to be?"

"If your Majesty will please to remember the portrait I painted of Mazulim", Amanzei answered, "you will be less astonished that Zephis should have found him attractive; he had some pleasing qualities, and could wear the garb of excellence. Besides, Zephis was not the first superior woman to be unlucky enough to fall in love with a coxcomb, and your Majesty is well aware that such things are seen every day."

"Not a doubt of it", the Sultan said; "I should think so indeed; he is quite right; one sees it every day: now don't go and ask me why, for I know nothing about it."

"In any case I am not asking you", the Sultana continued. "There are some things which it seems to me quite simple that you should not know, in spite of your keen wits. For a sensible woman", she went on, "to return an equally tender and constant love, and sure of the feelings and honesty of a man who loves her (if we grant that anything can ever make her sure) should finally surrender to him, that does not surprise me. But that she should be capable of frailty for the sake of a Mazulim, that I can by no means understand."

"Love", Amanzei answered, "would not be what it is, if . . ."

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"If, if!" the Sultan broke in; "how much longer are you going on with your silly subtleties? And have you forgotten that I have put a ban on disquisitions? What does it matter to you, I ask, that this Zephis woman loved that Mazulim fellow, or that the one was a ninny and the other a coxcomb? There it is. She loved him such as he was. You want to know why? Why did you not ask Amanzei while he was a woman? Do you imagine that he remembers that now? Not he! In any case, you, with all your discourses, are the reason why the stories I am told drag on so; and that infuriates me. Come, Emir, where were you? What became of this Zephis, who is so sensible that I am sick of her? How did all this end?"

"As it was bound to", Amanzei proceeded. "Mazulim, not wanting at first to be entirely lacking in consideration for Zephis, was false to her as privately as possible. But either he was not artful enough to deceive her for long, or he was too public and frequent in his other amours, and could not hide them for ever. Whichever it was, she complained; but, as she had all the blindness as well as all the delicacy of the most whole-hearted love, he soothed her easily. He continued to deceive her, and she reproached him again. At last he could bear it no longer, and, unmoved by either her love or her tears, he broke with her completely, and left her with the shame of having loved him, and of having lost him."

"Upon my word", the Sultan said, "he was quite right to leave her; and the proof is that I should have done the same myself! I know that she was very

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lovely, that she had every merit; but it is just that merit which would have wearied me, who want above all things to be amused. It is not, of course, that I am a Mazulim; no one, I think, can bring that against me; but at all events it is very agreeable to break with women, if only to hear what they have to say about it."

CHAPTER XI

WHICH CONTAINS A RECEIPT AGAINST ENCHANTMENTS

“THREE days after I had seen Zephis for the first time, Mazulim arrived alone. He hardly had time to give a few orders before a little woman, whose bearing was lively, indecorous, giddy, and yet affected, came into the closet. At a distance she had a certain radiant beauty, but close to offered a very middling face, which without its quaintness, its poutings and pursings, and the prodigious vivacity which its owner put on, one simply would not have looked at twice. Indeed this was the only thing which had made Mazulim wish to see her.

“‘Ah!’ he cried as she appeared, ‘it’s you! Do you know it is divine of you to come so soon?’

“This beauty, who in spite of her childish mannerisms was at least thirty years old, came towards Mazulim with that noble lack of decorum which was almost her only grace, and, not as an answer, and hardly even looking at him, she said:

“‘You were right when you told me your little retreat was pretty; really now, it is charming, furnished so tastefully, with everything so luxuriously soft. It is delicious.’

“‘Is it not true’, he answered, ‘that it is the prettiest in the whole quarter?’

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“‘From that remark’, she replied, ‘one would think that I was familiar with a great many. This closet is delightful’, she went on, ‘just made for love.’

“‘I am charmed to see you in it’, he said. ‘And charmed that you should like it.’

“‘Oh, as to that’, she answered, ‘no doubt I did not make as much to-do about coming here as I should have done; naturally I know as well as anybody how to be difficult and decent in an affair; but . . .’

“‘You do not exercise all your knowledge’, he struck in. ‘Oh, everybody gives you credit for that.’

“‘That at any rate is true’, she took up, ‘perfectly true; I am above pretence. Yesterday, when you told me that you loved me, and suggested that I should come here . . . I was, I may tell you, very much inclined to say No, but my honesty would not let me: I am frank, natural, you attract me, so here I am. Perhaps you do not think any the worse of me for it, eh?’

“‘Who, I?’ he answered, shrugging his shoulders. ‘What an idea! I would think a thousand times better of you for it, if that were possible.’

“‘Really, you are delightful’, she said; ‘but tell me, have you been waiting long?’

“‘I had just this moment come’, he replied. ‘And I blush for it: I am most upset. You must have thought you had arrived first.’

“‘That would have been a nice thing’, she said; ‘and I would certainly not have failed to be duly grateful.’

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“ ‘ You know very well ’, he answered, ‘ that people do not do that sort of thing on purpose, yet they can happen even to the best intentioned people.’

“ ‘ Yes, yes ’, she replied, ‘ I can see that, but all the same I would not care for it. But listen, I have some news for you. Zobeida has this very minute left Areb Kham.’

“ ‘ Is that all she has done to him? ’ he asked.

“ ‘ And Sophia ’, she pursued, ‘ has just taken Dara.’

“ ‘ And no one besides? ’ he asked again.

“ While she was speaking, Mazulim, who knew the sort of person she was far too well to have any respect for her, took the greatest liberties. Far from her seeming more moved by this than he, her eyes wandered disinterestedly round the room, until, looking at her watch she said to him:

“ ‘ But how silly we are being, Mazulim. Shall we be by ourselves all day? ’

“ ‘ What a question! ’ he answered. ‘ Of course we are to be by ourselves! ’

“ ‘ Really? I did not expect that ’, she replied. ‘ Oh, do leave off! ’ she added, without in the least wishing him to, or, for the matter of that, minding whether he went on (and so he took no notice); ‘ you are really too silly for words; and what is the object of our being by ourselves, please? ’

“ ‘ It seems to me ’, Mazulim answered coldly, and not prevented from amusing himself by this conversation, ‘ that we were agreed upon that.’

“ ‘ Agreed? ’ she said; ‘ what a story! Where

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did you get hold of that? I'll swear I did not say a word about it: in any case, it is all one to me, and I shall be able to keep you in order. No, no, stop, good sir! You have very queer ways. . . .'

" 'Not so much as all that; it seems to me that I am no queerer than other folk. Besides, seeing that we are by ourselves, I do not think I am overstepping the bounds. Oh, Zuleika', he added, 'your taste is so good; tell me, what do you think of my ceiling?'

" 'I was just considering it', she said. 'I would like less gilt on it: still, as it is, I think it very fine', she added, sitting on his knees, which, as far as I could see, did not at all disturb him. 'Now I think of it', she continued, 'I must needs be out of my senses to believe that you will be true to me who have never yet been so to anyone.'

" 'Ah, do not let us speak of that', he answered, still busying himself, and (thanks to Zuleika's kindness) very commodiously. 'You might, I fancy, be not a little inconvenienced if I turned out to be a more constant man than you took me for.'

" 'Will you not let me be!' she said, without stirring a finger either to escape from or to hinder him. 'As far as trustworthiness goes', she went on, as calmly as though he were not proceeding, 'that is a part of my nature.'

" 'Nowadays constancy is no merit, it is so common', he answered. 'And it is not even boasting to say one is capable of it; nevertheless, you have sometimes, however much you may pride yourself upon it, changed your . . .'

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“ ‘ Not often, do not think it ! ’

“ ‘ But I know, and you know that I know, who your lovers have been ’, he answered.

“ ‘ Very well ’, she said, ‘ in that case you will admit that I might easily have had more if I had wanted to ; but do be quiet ! How you torment me ! ’

“ ‘ Much less than I ought.’

“ ‘ Anyhow ’, she retorted, ‘ it is more than I like.’

“ ‘ What ? ’ he asked her. ‘ Do you not love me ? Come, no shilly-shallying ! Did we not settle everything ? ’

“ ‘ Well ! but . . . yes ’, she replied. ‘ But . . . ah, Mazulim ! I cannot abide you ! ’

“ ‘ That is a story ! ’ he denied coldly. ‘ That is impossible ! ’

“ Thereupon he placed her gently upon me.

“ ‘ I assure you, Mazulim ’, she said, as she settled herself down, ‘ that I am furious with you ; and I tell you I shall never forgive you.’

“ In spite of Zuleika’s terrible threats, Mazulim tried to complete her displeasure. But as, among other things, he had the bad habit of never waiting for himself, and she, apparently had that of waiting for nobody, he did, as a matter of fact, displease her beyond description. However, in spite of her rage, she waited, her vanity making her suspend her judgment. In all her previous experience (which had certainly been large and varied) she had never been failed, and this, to her, was incontrovertible proof of her value. Moreover, this Mazulim, whom she found so little deserving of praise, was, according to popular

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report, capable of the most wonderful feats. If (as seemed to be sufficiently attested) she had nothing to reproach herself with, by what freak of fortune was Mazulim, who had never been in the wrong with anyone, so strangely in the wrong with her? She had heard everyone say that she was charming; and Mazulim's reputation was too good for him not to deserve it in one way or another; and so, this state of things, which was giving her so much food for thought, was unnatural, and could not last.

"With these consolatory notions, and going over in her mind from hearsay to hearsay, Zuleika armed herself with patience, and dissembled her scorn as well as she could. Mazulim, meanwhile, discoursed in a most lover-like manner upon those beauties which seemed to affect him so little. For him to be as he was, he said, all the sorcerers of India must surely have been at work against him: 'but', he continued, 'what strength have their charms against yours, Zuleika? They have delayed your triumph, they cannot prevent it.'

"Zuleika, more angry than Mazulim was bothered, answered all this only by wicked little smiles, into which, however, for fear of depressing him altogether, she did not put all the expression she would have liked to.

" 'Have you', she asked banteringly, 'been mixing yourself up with sorcerers? I should advise you to get on good terms with them again; people who can play such tricks are dangerous enemies to have.'

" 'They would be less formidable if you were more

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inclined to give them the lie', he answered. 'And I believe also that, in spite of their ill will, if I had loved you less thoroughly, I should not have felt . . .'

" 'Oh, that argument you are dishing me up now' she interrupted, 'is one in which I believe mightily little', for having decided within herself how long a man might remain spell-bound, she thought that by that time she had allowed him respite enough.

" 'I am very well aware', he replied, 'that if you judge me strictly you cannot be pleased with me; but the less so you are, the more you ought to try to put an end to my misfortune.'

" 'I do not think', she retorted, 'that that would be quite proper.'

" 'I thought you less of a slave to decorum', he went on in a scoffing voice. 'And I durst hope . . .'

" 'Truly your time for joking is happily chosen', she interrupted. 'You are right; nothing can show you to greater advantage than this adventure!'

" 'But Zuleika', he pursued, 'will you never realize that the tone you are adopting is just the very one to do me harm, and perpetuate my humiliation?'

" 'I assure you', she said, 'that is the last thing I mind about.'

" 'But', he asked her, 'if you mind about it so little, why are you so angry?'

" 'Allow me to tell you, sir, that that question deserves no answer.' Thereupon she got up, in spite of all his attempts to retain her.

" 'Leave me alone', she said acidly; 'I want neither to see nor to hear you.'

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“ ‘Truly’, he cried, ‘I have seen women as unfortunate as this, but never so infuriated.’ ”

“ This exclamation of Mazulim did not please Zuleika: greatly irritated by the accident that had happened to her, vexed beyond measure at Mazulim’s frigid bearing, she vented her rage upon a large china vase which she found to hand, and smashed it into atoms.

“ ‘Alas! Madam’, Mazulim said smiling, ‘you would have found nothing here to break if all the ladies who have been discontented with me had avenged themselves in the same way: however’, he added, seating himself upon me, ‘I pray you not restrain yourself.’ ”

“ ‘There now’, Shah Baham said, “that’s a woman after my own heart: she has feelings, and is not like your Zephis who took everything as it came, and who, besides, was the silliest piece of preciosity I have ever come across in my life! Now this one interests me very much, and I recommend her to you, Amanzei, do you see? Do not let her always be so vexatiously placed.”

“ ‘Sire’, Amanzei answered, “I will do all I can for her as far as my respect for truth will allow me.”

“ When he had finished speaking, Mazulim fell into a brown study. Zuleika, who had gone to sit down in a corner far from him, for some time bore well enough the scornful indifference with which he treated her, and to pay him out, began to sing.

“ ‘I may be mistaken’, he said to her when she

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had finished, 'but I believe the song you have just sung me is out of So-and-so's opera.'

"She did not answer.

" 'You have a pretty voice', he went on; 'not of a large compass, but with a lovely tone which goes straight to the heart.'

" 'It is highly flattered by your approval', she answered, without looking at him.

" 'You may not believe it', he went on, 'but you may really well be flattered, for few people know as much about music as I do. Another quality I find you have, which I would enlarge upon if I were at the moment lucky enough to have you feel that I was worthy to praise you, is a charming expression, which could not be bettered for its liveliness and truth, and which is so well supported by your eyes that it is impossible to hear you without being touched to the heart. You will, I suppose, say once more that it is highly flattered by my approval.'

" 'No', she answered more gently, 'I am not angry that you should find nice things in me, and the more I know you to be a connoisseur, the more your praises are bound to please me.'

" 'That is exactly the reason which would make me wish to deserve yours', he said.

" 'Oh, no doubt', she remarked.

" 'Surely you are not going to say that you are not a judge of anything?' he went on. 'And do not be so outrageously unjust as to imagine that I am indifferent as to whether you think well or ill of me. Will you add this insult to all those you have already

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passed upon me? Ah, Zuleika! can it be that what ought to increase your affection for me merely irritates you the more?’

“ ‘And can it also be’, she replied heatedly, ‘that you think me fool enough to take as a proof of love the most hideous affront you could possibly offer me?’

“ ‘An affront!’ he cried. ‘My dearest Zuleika! you know very little about love if you think that what has happened need make either of us blush. I will make bold enough to go further: the people you have honoured with your affection loved you very little if you did not find them as unfortunate as I am.’

“ ‘Really, sir’, she said, ‘on that topic I pray you give over, or I shall leave you. I can no longer endure the absurdity, the indecency of your remarks.’

“ ‘I am aware that they hurt you’, he answered; ‘and I confess that I am surprised they should affect you in this way; but what I cannot be reconciled to is that you should obstinately continue to find me guilty. I would think it quite natural for an ordinary woman, raw, and unused to good society, to be mortally offended by such an incident; but you! that you should be exactly the same as an ignoramus! Really, that is unforgivable.’

“ ‘Indeed!’ she said; ‘one must be the first of fools not to be flattered by it, and I am astonished that I should not yet have thanked you for the extraordinary impression I have made upon you.’

“ ‘Joking apart’, he said, beginning to rise, ‘I will prove to you that I am not wrong.’

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“‘No, no!’ she cried. ‘I forbid you to come near me.’

“‘I will obey your orders, unjust as they are, and I will prove it from a distance, since you see fit.’

“‘By all means’, she answered. ‘That will certainly be more convenient for you; but let us do better: let us drop the subject, for I am not so imbecile as ever to be persuaded that the more a man loves, the less he can show his mistress that he does.’

“‘That is to say’, he replied carelessly, ‘that you believe exactly the opposite?’

“‘Yes’, she retorted, ‘exactly: nobody could be more convinced of anything than I am of this.’

“‘Well then, Madam, you can boast of being the most indelicate person in the world, and, if I did not love you so much that nothing under heaven could tear me from you, I confess that your way of looking at things would separate me from you for ever.’

“‘It would certainly be very odd if it pleased you’, she said.

“‘Oh, no!’ he resumed coolly, ‘I am not so interested to declare against it as you do me the honour to believe, but what has been proved since the beginning of time is that the more one loves, the less one is in possession of one’s faculties, and that it only belongs to hearts of grosser mould, incapable of being pierced by the arrows of passion, to be able to command them at such a moment as when you found me so unlike myself. If the hope of delight is enough to upset a lover, think what effect the approach of the

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happy instants he so keenly desired must produce upon him: think how his soul must have been exhausted in the raptures which precede them, and whether the disorder you reproach me with is as disobliging to a woman of sense as that self-possession of which, no doubt thoughtlessly, you wish me to have been capable. Frankly', he added, making as if to throw himself at her feet, 'this cannot be the first time that you . . .'

" 'Oh, cease this fantastic jesting', she interrupted him. 'Leave me alone. I wish to go out, never to see you again.'

" 'But Zuleika', he said, leading her towards me, 'will you not realize that it seems, from the way you treat misfortune, that you do not give yourself credit for enough charms to put a period to it?'

" Whether Mazulim's subtle dialectic had already disposed Zuleika to mercy, or that the great reputation he had gotten himself made his statements seem more likely, she allowed herself to be brought upon me, though she offered that slight resistance which commonly inflames rather than it impedes. By little and little Mazulim obtained more, and at last found himself placed as he had been when Zuleika had got so angry.

" Soon disturbed by Mazulim's ardour, she began vehemently to wish that he would allow his faculties to be less paralysed than at the first time; she was already hoping this was so when Mazulim, more refined than ever, failed woefully in meeting her sweet hopes. She was all the more indignant since (vanity

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apart) it would then have been a pleasure to her if he had behaved otherwise."

"Oh, well!" the Sultan said, "then let him give over: this wearies me as much as it did her. Not that I have taken sides with Zuleika, but I ask you if there is anyone in the whole world who would not become impatient, if even the long-suffering of a Dervish would stand it. Egad! he need not have taken all that trouble to make her stay. Amanzei, you promised me better than that. In the end you will make me think that you bear that woman a grudge; and I tell you outright, I should take that ill."

"I do not in the least, Sire", Amanzei answered. "If I were inventing a story for your Majesty's pleasure, it would be easy to arrange matters to your taste, but I am telling you what I saw, and I cannot, without tampering with the truth, make Mazulim behave otherwise than he did."

"Oh, what a dolt that Mazulim was!" Shah Baham cried. "And how he provokes me!"

"But", the Sultana said, "I do not know why you should be so incensed against him: he did not do it on purpose any more than you did."

"Who? He?" he went on. "Faith! I'm not so sure. He was a dreadful fellow."

"Besides", the Sultana spoke once more, "this Zuleika whom you like so much was one of the most arrant . . ."

"I beg you, Madam", he checked her. "Think what you will of her to yourself, but tell me no ill against her. I know very well that it is enough for

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me to take a liking to someone for you to dislike them; and that offends me, I warn you."

"Your anger does not alarm me", the Sultana answered; "and what is more, I should not be in the least astonished if this Zuleika, whom you love so much to-day, should give you a mortal spleen to-morrow."

"I doubt it", the Sultan retorted; "I don't tread on my own heels as you do, not I; and until that does happen, let us at any rate hear the rest of her story."

"Zuleika grew red with fury at the fresh insult Mazulim passed upon her charms.

"Really, sir", she told him, pushing him violently away from her; "if this is your way of making much of me, I suggest that it is very ill-timed."

"I would be the first to say so", he answered, "if I could imagine that you for a moment believed you deserved my shortcomings; but I see no sign that you do, and I admit freely that I have no excuse."

"Well then", she said, "when people know that they are made a certain way, they ought not to plague others."

"I shall no doubt make up my mind to that if what has happened occurs again", he answered, "but you will allow me to flatter myself with contrary hopes."

"Really", she said, "I should not advise you to."

"Then she got up, took her fan, put on her gloves, and drawing forth a pot of rouge, placed herself in front of a looking-glass. While she was trying with the greatest care to make herself as she had been when

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she first arrived, Mazulim, coming behind her and interfering with her task, begged her tenderly not to take so much trouble over what she would certainly have to do again. At first Zuleika only answered with a grimace which should have told him what little faith she put in his prophecies; but, finding that he continued to tease her, she said:

“ ‘ Well, sir, is this to go on for ever? And do you not want me to be able to go out? You have only to say.’ ”

“ ‘ But as far as I can remember ’, he answered, ‘ all has already been said on that subject: are you not going to sup here? ’ ”

“ ‘ Not that I know of ’, she replied.

“ ‘ You are sure ’, he said with a smile, ‘ that you did not count upon doing so? ’ ”

“ ‘ To be brief ’, she answered, ‘ I am engaged for supper, and it is getting late.’ ”

“ ‘ That’s all fudge ’, he remarked, throwing her upon me, and trying once more to see if he could not find the means of making the time seem shorter to her.

“ ‘ Listen, Mazulim!’ she said to him gently. ‘ You may believe as you will, and I will second it ungrudgingly; but the part you are making me play is preposterous.’ ”

“ ‘ A little more kindness on your part would have made me less to be pitied; but you are so unbending.’ ”

“ ‘ Really!’ she retorted; ‘ it would be inhuman to deprive you of the only excuse you have left.’ ”

“ He answered manfully that he would willingly take the risk.

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“Then she entered upon his style of reasoning, so as to have the pleasure of putting him entirely in the wrong. The more he deserved her pity, the more indignant she felt, for she was not of a generous nature. Hurt that he should have been so unaffected by her charms, she seemed to be still more so that he responded so ill to her last favours; her vanity alone made her bear what wounded her so deeply. No sooner did she begin to congratulate herself upon success, than she saw him wilt. Twenty times she was forced to renounce a hope which seemed to offer itself only the more cruelly to disappoint her. But there! after all she had done for Mazulim could she leave him to his fate? Perhaps another minute would conquer his ingratitude. It would have been sweeter for her to owe everything to Mazulim’s tenderness, but it was more to her glory to snatch a stubborn victory.

“Maybe this argument which Zuleika advanced was something lacking in logic; but in the situation she was in it was something to have any logic at all.

“Mazulim, who was aware from the way she looked at him that she had need of support to bear up against the frigidity which, in spite of himself, he showed towards her, never stopped pouring into her ears encomiums upon her passionate nature.

“‘Assuredly’, she cried out in her turn, at a moment when, impatience perhaps gaining the upper hand, she was led to regard as more than ever meritorious the kindness she showed him, ‘assuredly it must be owned that I have a noble soul.’

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' At this so extremely just observation Mazulim could not help bursting out laughing, and Zuleika, who knew how dangerous it sometimes is to laugh, grew very angry at him for it.

" Mazulim's gaiety, however, was not so fatal as she had feared. The sorcerers, who until then had persecuted him so ruthlessly, began even to withdraw their malign spells from him. Although much was still needed to make the victory he was gaining over them complete, she did not refrain from congratulating herself aloud; it was not that, with her enlightenment, she was deceiving herself, but she wanted to fortify Mazulim with a show of confidence in him: she knew him very ill to suppose he needed it.

" Mazulim, who was the best man in the world for taking advantage of anything, no sooner felt himself less prostrated than he carried temerity to the point of believing himself capable of the boldest undertakings. Whatever Zuleika, who was in a position to judge in a more balanced way, might say, she could not dissuade him. Whether he imagined he could not delay without being lost, or whether (which is more likely) he thought he need explain nothing more to her, he began to try what had only once failed him, and that by the merest accident. Zuleika, who was not easily carried away, and who, moreover, was not the last woman in Agra to think well of herself, was astounded at Mazulim's presumption, and made some quite unequivocal remarks upon his audacity. They had no effect, and since Mazulim was as obstinate as ever, she refused, no more than Zephis had, both as

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a necessary corollary to her faith in her charms and to humble him, to lend herself to methods she thought inconceivably ridiculous.

“ ‘ Oh, well then ! ’ she said disdainfully.

“ Suddenly her expression changed, and I judged from her colour and contempt, as well as from Mazulim’s mocking and insulting air, that what she had stated to be impracticable was really as easy as anything.”

“ D’you see that now ! ” the Sultan cried. “ So the women either complain, or else make themselves out to be wonders ! It’s as well to know that.”

“ Why ? ” the Sultana asked. “ What startling discovery have you made now ? ”

“ Oh, now I know where I am ”, the Sultan answered ; “ and if anyone should take it into her head to reproach me, I shall know what to answer. All the same I am very sorry that Zuleika should have been mortified like this ; she certainly deserved it less than anybody ; but go on, Emir ! there are some very good things in what you have just told us, and this gives me high hopes of the rest.”

CHAPTER XII

NOT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM THE FOREGOING

“THOUGH the unpleasant experience Zuleika was passing through humiliated her very much, it did not rob her of the presence of mind needful at so vexatious a juncture. She congratulated Mazulim, and complained of anything rather than of the thing which filled her with resentment; and, to try to save her fame, did not hesitate to do him the honours he certainly did not deserve.

“I do not know whether it was to mortify Zuleika, or whether, contrary to his custom, he wanted to give himself some due, at all events, whatever she did, he would on no account believe what she said. There were, he stubbornly maintained, such things as unlucky days, days which one would die rather than live through, if one could foresee them.

“Zuleika agreed that there were no doubt days which did not begin brilliantly, but which in the end one found afforded more cause for congratulation than for complaint.

“‘I protest to you’, she added, with a tenderness she was at that moment very far from feeling, ‘that I have had grounds for supposing that the things you have told me over and over again about my beauty were not sincere, or that the things which you seemed

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to admire in me were effaced by defects which shocked you all the more as you did not expect them; but you have set my mind at rest.'

" 'Ah, Zuleika!' the pitiless Mazulim cried out, 'how ill your fears were founded! I feel how much I owe to your goodness; but it does not blind me, and the more generous you are, the more coals of fire you heap upon my head.'

" 'How absurd!' she replied. 'At least do not be seized by such a false idea; nothing can be more unjust.'

" At the end of this interchange they set to walking up and down the room, each made uneasy by the other, both without love or desire, and, reduced by their mutual imprudence and the exigencies of meeting in a little retreat to spend together the rest of a day, they did not seem disposed to put it to any pleasurable use. Zuleika had some fine maxims to ponder anent the hollowness of reputations. What inwardly drove her to distraction (for I could easily read into her soul) was the impossibility of taking her revenge upon Mazulim. 'If I tell, who will believe me?' she asked herself; 'or if they believe me, would their prejudice in his favour let them believe that he could have been so much in the wrong with me if I had had the wherewithal to prevent his being in the wrong? Whatever I may do about it, I shall never be able to undeceive everybody.'

" These notions kept her dismally occupied. As for Mazulim, he did not seem to take the least interest in such questions. For some minutes they walked up

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and down without saying anything; at the same time they occasionally smiled at one another in a forced and formal way.

“ ‘You are pensive’, he said at last.

“ ‘Does that surprise you?’ she answered prudishly. ‘Do you suppose that to be on the terms I am with you is nothing extraordinary for a right-thinking woman?’

“ ‘Indeed’, he replied, ‘I believe right-thinking women to be quite used to it.’

“ ‘It is clear’, she retorted, ‘that you do not know how such a thing perturbs them, and what terrible struggles they have to go through before they come to it.’

“ ‘What you say there is very probable’, he answered, ‘for, to judge from the way they are cut short, they must be distressingly fatiguing.’

“ ‘That’, she cried, ‘is one of the most unmannerly things you could say. Did you think you were being very witty when you said it? Do you know that that is exactly the sort of thing professional seducers say?’

“ ‘I would not think the worse of it for that’, he declared.

“ ‘At least you would think it very unfair’, she went on, ‘if you knew how much it had cost me to accept you.’

“ ‘Why’, he cried, ‘you dreamed of it! I am outraged; I flattered myself of the contrary, and I bear you a grudge for cleansing me of an error by which I was the gainer without your losing anything

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of my consideration. Well, tell me, I pray you, did Zadig cost you as much thinking?’

“ ‘What do you mean?’ she asked freezingly. ‘Who is this Zadig person?’

“ ‘I beg your pardon’, he answered mockingly; ‘I would have sworn you knew him.’

“ ‘Know him, yes’, she answered, ‘as one knows anyone else.’

“ ‘I believe that, little as he is known to you, he would be very annoyed if he knew you were here’, he continued; ‘and I am much mistaken if your kindnesses to me would not grieve him terribly. Be honest!’ he said, seeing her shrug her shoulders; ‘Zadig pleased you before I had the honour of pleasing you, and I would even bet that at the present time you are on terms with each other.’

“ ‘That jest’, she answered, ‘is in very bad taste.’

“ ‘After all’, he continued, ‘even if you were unfaithful to him he would still be too fortunate: a man like Zadig is little made to be loved, and I have always wondered how a gay, sparkling creature like you could take such a cold, untalkative lover.’

“ ‘There you wrong him, Mazulim’, she replied. ‘He is all tenderness. I have sacrificed him to you—it would be fruitless for me to deny it; but I am afraid you will very soon make me repent of having done so.’

“ ‘You have been fickle’, he answered; ‘and I confess that I have been inconstant; but the less we have hitherto been capable of a serious attachment,

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the more glorious it will be for us to cling to each other.'

"As he said this he led her towards me, but in a way which plainly showed that good breeding alone directed this step.

" 'Truly you are charming', he told her; 'and without a certain nicety which you do not quite discard even with me, I know of no one so well fitted to make a lover happy.'

" 'I confess', she agreed, 'that I am naturally reserved; nevertheless, you have no cause to complain of that.'

" 'No doubt', he replied, 'you make me happy; but born without desires, you do not sufficiently meet those you arouse: I feel a certain constraint in all that you do for me; you are always afraid of giving yourself too freely, and, between ourselves, I suspect you of having very little sensibility.'

"While Mazulim was speaking thus to Zuleika, he squeezed her hands most passionately.

" 'Though your too great charms have already done me damage', he pursued, 'I cannot deny myself the pleasure of admiring them again: even if I should die of it, such a number of beauties shall no longer be hidden from me. Gods!' he cried in a transport, 'ah, if it may be, render me worthy of my good fortune!'

"Whatever Zuleika may have said of his want of sensibility, the admiration which seemed to overwhelm Mazulim, the liveliness of his rapture, and the pains he took to make her share it, moved and troubled her.

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“ ‘ Must you still complain? ’ she asked, tenderly.

“ He answered only by making as though to prove all his gratitude; but Zuleika still had in mind how little he was to be depended upon, and, altogether mistrustful of his tumultuous condition, said in a voice which betrayed all her fears:

“ ‘ Ah, Mazulim! are you not about to love me too much? ’

“ Although Mazulim could not help laughing at her terrors, she found she was less loved than she feared.

“ Their mutual happiness relieved them of the constrained and wearied looks that had for some time existed between them. Their conversation grew more brisk; Zuleika, who thought she had delivered Mazulim out of the hands of sorcerers, gave herself great credit for her charms; and Mazulim, better pleased with himself, let himself float on the tide of her high spirits.

“ While they were in this happy frame of mind, supper was brought in, and their meal was a gay one. Zuleika and Mazulim, who were perhaps the two most mischievous persons in the whole of Agra, spared no one at all.

“ ‘ Can you tell me ’, Mazulim asked, ‘ why Altun Khan has for the last few days looked so puffed up? ’

“ ‘ Heavens! Of course ’, she answered. ‘ Surely you know he is on the best of terms with Ayesha? ’

“ ‘ But that, as far as I can see ’, he said, ‘ would only be one reason the more for looking small.’

“ ‘ Oh, yes, for anyone else ’, she repartied; ‘ but don’t you think it very lucky for him? ’

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“ ‘ I must confess not ’, he replied. ‘ However absurd Altun Khan may be, I cannot help pitying him: a man whom Ayesha has got hold of is, without question, the most unlucky of men. ’

“ ‘ What is so curious about it ’, she said, ‘ is that she is keeping it quiet. ’

“ ‘ Oh, come now ! ’ he answered; ‘ you are trying to make out that there is some hitch. Ayesha has never concealed a lover, and I can swear that at her age, and with her enormous face, she will be less inclined than ever to . . . ’

“ ‘ All the same, it is perfectly true. ’

“ ‘ Well, if so ’, he maintained, ‘ it is because Altun Khan asked her to keep it dark. And tell me about little Messim; you do not appear ever to see her now. ’

“ ‘ Because it is impossible to see her now ’, she answered, assuming prudery; ‘ her behaviour is shocking. ’

“ ‘ You are right ’, he replied seriously. ‘ Nothing is more important for a self-respecting woman than to see only good company. I think her looks are improving ’, he went on.

“ ‘ On the contrary ’, she answered; ‘ she is growing hideous. ’

“ ‘ I do not agree with you ’, he replied; ‘ her skin is taking on an undertone of yellow, which, with her air of fatigue, suits her admirably; if she goes on to look ailing, she will be charming. ’

“ ‘ I should never come to an end, Sire ’, Amanzei broke off to say, “ if I were to tell your Majesty all the idle things they remarked upon. ”

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"Ah, yes, I can well believe it", the Sultan answered; "and I give you leave to cut them short; all the same, whenever I think of it, you will please to repeat them all to me."

"I would make so bold as to represent to your Majesty", Amanzei went on, "that there would be many which would not be interesting enough to . . ."

"Yes, quite so", the Sultan interrupted; "those would not interest me; but why (I have often thought of this point) why isn't everything in a story, a tale, or whatever you call it interesting?"

"For many reasons", the Sultana said. "What leads up to an event could obviously not be so interesting as the event itself; besides, if things were all at the same level of interest, they would fatigue one by their sameness: the mind cannot always be alert, the heart cannot always be moved, and both must needs from time to time have a little rest."

"I see", the Sultan said; "it's like being dull sometimes on purpose to enjoy amusements more. When one has judgment, and thinks in a certain way, whatever one does one clears everything up. Well, then, Amanzei?"

"After supper, Mazulim, less stirred by Zuleika's charms than he had been, although he proposed a thousand amusements to her, never hit upon the only one which would have suited her, and Zuleika got ready to go away in a fashion which made me suspect I should never see her again."

"Nevertheless, in spite of Zuleika's ill-humour, and the way in which Mazulim had treated her, he

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had the assurance before parting from her to ask for another meeting, and added eagerly that it must be in two days' time. Although I believe that at that moment she had little wish to grant him what he so warmly asked, she answered that she was quite agreeable, but so coldly that I did not think she meant to keep her word.

"I then reflected that after Mazulim had gone I should be dull in his little retreat; that it would be time enough for me to come back when he came back himself, and that I could not do better both for amusement and instruction than to follow Zuleika to her home. I acted upon this idea, and got into her palanquin with her. As soon as I was in her palace, I went, by the gravitational quality Brahma had put into me, to hide myself in the first sofa that I saw.

"The next day Zuleika had hardly come into her dressing-room when Zadig was announced. She bade them beg him wait, either from not wishing to appear before him without all the beauty she usually wore when she was prepared for visitors, or from thinking that it would not be proper for him to see her in her disarray. Keeping Zuleika's falseness in mind, this last reason was not perhaps so flimsy as might appear.

"At last Zadig came in. Even if he had not been announced by name, I should have known him from the description I had heard Mazulim give of him the evening before. He was serious, chilly, constrained, and looked exactly as though he would treat love with that dignity of feeling, and that scrupulous delicacy, which we think so ridiculous nowadays, and which,

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perhaps, have always been more wearisome than worthy.

“Zadig came towards Zuleika as shyly as if he had never told her his love; on her side she received him with a studied and ceremonious politeness, and in a manner just as prudish as was necessary to beguile him.

“While Zuleika’s maids were in the room they spoke carelessly of news, or of other equally frivolous things. Zadig, who thought he was the only person Zuleika had ever loved, and who did not consider the greatest delicacies equal to her deserts, did not permit himself the smallest peep at her; and Zuleika, who, contrary to all likelihood, had found a man fool enough to esteem her, imitated his reserve, or only looked at him with those hypocritical and veiled glances to be seen in most prudes on all and every occasion.

“However carefully Zadig might put a guard upon himself, Zuleika thought she could read in his eyes a sadness not habitual with him; she asked him in vain what ailed him. To all the questions she put to him so gently, he answered only with profound bows, and still profounder sighs.

“Her maids went out when they had done her hair.

“‘Now, Zadig’, she said with authority, ‘will you please tell me what is the matter with you? Do you imagine that I, taking to heart as I do everything that concerns you, can fail to be hurt at your silence? In short, answer me! I wish it: I will not forgive you if you persist in being mum.’

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“ ‘Perhaps you will forgive me still less if I do speak’, he answered at length, ‘and think that what upsets me ought on no account be told you.’

“ Zuleika insisted, and so earnestly, that he thought he could no longer hold his tongue without offending her.

“ ‘Will you believe it, Madam’, he said, growing red at the absurdity he found in what he was going to tell her, ‘I am jealous!’

“ ‘You, Zadig!’ she cried in astonishment. ‘You love me, I love you, and yet you are jealous! Can you be in earnest?’

“ ‘Ah, Madam!’ he answered, deeply moved, ‘do not crush me with your anger! I feel to the full how absurd my notion is—indeed it makes me blush. My mind rejects the whispers of my heart, and denies their truth; yet they carry me away, and all the respect I have for you, all the honour you deserve, do not prevent me being horridly tormented. In fact, the shame I load myself with for my suspicions does not banish them.’

“ ‘Listen to me, Zadig’, she answered him grandly, ‘and remember for ever what I am telling you. I love you, I am not afraid of saying so again, and I will give you a proof of my feelings which you will find incontrovertible: it is to forgive you your suspicions. Perhaps I could say to you that the difficulty you had in making a conquest of me, and my manner of life, ought to give you no excuse for doubting me, and that a person of my character should inspire confidence. I ought even to despise your fears, or be

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angry at them. But it is sweeter for me to reassure you, and my love can even descend to an explanation.’
“ ‘Oh, Madam!’ Zadig cried, flinging himself by her knees, ‘I believe you love me, and I would die of grief if I could think that the suspicions, which I did not even entertain for long, would give you a reason for doubting my respect for you.’

“ ‘No, Zadig’, she answered smiling, ‘I do not doubt it; but let me hear something of what caused you this disquiet.’

“ ‘What matter, Madam, since I no longer feel it’, he replied.

“ ‘I want to know’, she insisted.

“ ‘Well then’, he said, ‘the attentions Mazulim has seemed to pay you . . .’

“ ‘What!’ she interrupted. ‘It is of him you are jealous? Ah, Zadig! Is it for you to be afraid of Mazulim, and did you despise me enough to think that he could please me? Ah, Zadig, ought I to, can I, ever forgive you for that?’”

CHAPTER XIII

ENDS ONE ADVENTURE AND BEGINS ANOTHER

“ As she finished speaking, her eyes grew moist with tears, and Zadig, believing them sincere, could not help mingling his own with them.

“ ‘ Oh, I am in fault ’, he told her tenderly; ‘ and I feel that even the violence of my passion for you is no excuse.’

“ ‘ Ah, cruel man ! ’ she answered with a sob. ‘ Be jealous if you will; give a loose to all your frenzy—I give you leave; but if you know me so little as to mistrust my affection, at least do not think me capable of loving Mazulim ! ’

“ ‘ I believe you dislike him ’, he answered, ‘ and I never thought you could be taken by him; yet I could not help trembling at seeing him come here.’

“ ‘ Yet ’, she replied, ‘ of all the people you know he is the least dangerous as far as I am concerned. Even if my heart were not preoccupied with a deep passion, though Mazulim adored me and though his charms outnumbered his vices, if that were possible, he would still be the least of men in my eyes. How do you suppose any woman (I do not say a self-respecting one, but one who has not lost all sense of shame) could take Mazulim, a man who has never loved, who declares outright that he is incapable of a passion,

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and for whom even the feeblest sentiment is an idle dream; a man, in short, who knows no pleasure but that of bringing dishonour upon the women he has? I will speak of his absurdities no more, not because I have not the wherewithal to enlarge upon them, but that, in truth, I would blush to speak to you about him longer. Finally, I am very glad, although I think your suspicions as insulting as they are misplaced, that you should have told me what they were, and I promise you that you shall see Mazulim here only for so long as will be necessary for me to break with him completely.'

"Zadig, kissing her hand rapturously, thanked her a thousand times for doing for him what she did.

"'But, for what are you thanking me?' she asked him. 'I am making no sacrifice for you.'

"'But Madam,' he said to her, 'is it possible that Mazulim has never told you that you seemed charming to him?'

"'What an idea!' she cried smiling. 'Oh, no! I assure you that Mazulim knows me better than you do, and, giddy as he wishes to seem, he is not giddy enough to pay his addresses to women of a certain distinction. However, notwithstanding this, I should not be surprised if, without ever having wanted me and without ever having in his life approached me, he should say publicly one of these days, either that he has been, or that he is, upon terms with me. Really now', she added laughing, 'could anyone but a jealous lover believe it?'

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“‘No’, he replied; ‘I may be ridiculous enough to fear it sometimes, but never to believe it.’

“‘I declare I would not depend upon it’, she answered. ‘With your temperament it must be a delicious thing to hear your mistress spoken ill of, and to come and raise the most dreadful quarrel with her on account of the words of the first coxcomb who, knowing your character, wishes to make you uneasy.’

“‘For pity’s sake, spare me!’ he cried; ‘and remember that the jealousy you are pardoning me . . .’

“‘Will perhaps not be the last for to-day’, she continued. ‘The arrival of Mazulim would be enough to make you relapse into your woes.’

“‘Let us say no more about it’, he begged; ‘and since you have forgiven me, and since everything, even my injustice, proves that I love you, do not let us waste precious moments, but seal your forgiveness of me!’

“At these words, which Zuleika understood very well, she assumed an embarrassed air, and said to him:

“‘How importunate you are with your desires! Will you never restrain them for my sake? If you knew how much I should love you if you were more reasonable. . . . It is true’, she added with a smile, ‘I would love you much better; I should think so, at least, and having nothing to fear from you on that side I so greatly detest, you would see me give myself with much more warmth to the things which please me.’

“Yet while she was uttering these august words,

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she languorously allowed herself to be led towards me.

“ ‘ I swear to you ’, she told Zadig, once she was seated upon me, ‘ that I shall never quarrel with you as long as I live.’

“ ‘ That is how I would wish it ’, he replied. ‘ But I do not hope it.’

“ ‘ As for me ’, she answered, ‘ from the trouble I take to make it up with you, I am beginning to think it true.’

“ In spite of her repugnance, Zuleika at length yielded to the importunities of Zadig; but with what decorum! what majesty! what noble modesty!—such as can hardly have been seen in a like case. Anyone but Zadig would no doubt have complained: for him, wedded to the most minute punctilio, Zuleika’s virtue exalted him with pleasure, and he imitated as best he could the airs of dignity and grandeur she put on; and the less she seemed to love him, the better he was pleased.

“ Although I do not know what Zuleika made of it all, in any case she proposed Zadig should spend the day with her. So that no one should know that they were together,* she gave orders to say that she was not at home. Zadig, whom jealousy had, as is usual, only made more loving than ever, responded very satisfactorily to Zuleika’s kindness, and in spite of his taciturnity, did not weary her for a moment. At last towards midnight, he went away, convinced, as far as a man can be, that she was the most affectionate and right-thinking woman in all Agra.

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“ I have said that from the way Zuleika had bidden farewell to Mazulim, and much more from the way she looked at things, I did not believe that she would wish to continue an acquaintance so little agreeable to a woman of her character, in a place where neither love nor pleasure had anything to give her. Nevertheless, curiosity carried the day against all other considerations. As Zadig was leaving her, she told him that some very important piece of business would prevent her from seeing him the next day; and the time for her evening appointment had hardly come, when she got into her palanquin, and with my soul, which followed her, took the road for the little retreat where we found a slave waiting for her, and for Mazulim.

“ ‘ How now ! ’ she asked the servant peremptorily. ‘ He is not yet here ? It is charming of him to keep me waiting ! How admirable for me to get here first ! ’

“ The slave answered her that Mazulim would soon arrive.

“ ‘ Indeed ’, she replied, ‘ these are very peculiar airs and graces he is putting on.’

“ The slave went out, and Zuleika sat down angrily upon me. As she was naturally impulsive, she could not stay quiet, and, while upbraiding herself with being outrageously easy, swore a thousand times over that she would never come to see Mazulim again. At last she heard a carriage stop outside. She was primed to tell Mazulim everything that rage could suggest; and, rising briskly, she flung open the door, crying out :

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“ ‘Indeed, sir, your manners are vastly singular and unusual! Ah, Heavens!’ she added, seeing the man who came in.

“I was almost as astounded as she was at seeing a man I did not know.”

“What?” the Sultan asked, “it was not Mazulim?”

“No, Sire”, Amanzei answered.

“It was not he!” the Sultan repeated; “that’s very odd now. And why was it not he?”

“Your Majesty”, Amanzei answered, “is about to hear.”

“You know”, the Sultan went on, “this is one of the funniest things in the world. That man was apparently mistaken. Oh, no doubt of it, he was mistaken, that is obvious. But tell me, Amanzei, what is a ‘little retreat’? Whenever you have mentioned it I have pretended to know, but now I can hold no longer.”

“Sire”, Amanzei answered, “a little retreat is a secluded house, where, without attendants or on-lookers, people go . . .”

“Ah, yes!” the Sultan interrupted, “I can imagine that must be very convenient. Go on!”

“Filled with anger and amazement at the sight of the man who had just come in, Zuleika could not utter a word.

“ ‘I know, Madam’, this Indian said to her respectfully, ‘how astonished you must be at seeing me. Moreover, I am not ignorant of the reasons you have for wishing to see here anyone rather than myself. If my presence confounds you, yours causes

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me as deep an emotion. I did not suspect that the person to whom Mazulim begged me to bring his apologies would be the very last person whom (were I lucky enough to be in his place) I would wish to fail. It is not in any way Mazulim's fault; no, Madam, he knows what he owes to your kindness; he was burning to fling himself before you to speak of his gratitude: cruel orders, which he even thought of disobeying, sacred as they ought to be to him, have torn him away from such sweet pleasures. He thought it better to count upon my discretion than upon that of a slave, and never for a moment thought of hazarding a secret in which such a person as you, especially, is involved.'

"Zuleika was so astonished at what was happening to her that the Indian might have gone on speaking without her finding the strength to interrupt him. Her embarrassment even made her wish that he had still more to say to her. In consternation, almost rigid, she lowered her eyes, did not dare to look at him, flushed red with shame and anger, and at last began to weep. The Indian, taking her civilly by the hand, brought her to sit upon me, upon whom she sank without saying a word.

" 'I see, Madam', he continued, 'that you persist in thinking Mazulim in fault, and all that I can say to excuse him seems only to incense you further against him. How lucky he is! Friend of mine though he be, I envy him those precious tears. So much love . . .'

" 'Who says that I love him?' Zuleika, who had had time to recover herself, answered proudly. 'May

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I not have come here for reasons which have nothing whatever to do with love? Is it impossible to see Mazulim without being overcome by those feelings you attribute to me? On what grounds, in fact, do you dare suppose that he is wounding my heart?’

“‘I dare believe’, the Indian answered, with a smile, ‘that, if my conjectures are not true, they are at any rate likely. The tears you shed, your anger, the time of day at which I find you in a spot ever dedicated to love, all make me believe that love alone had the power to bring you here. Do not deny it, Madam’, he added; ‘you are in love. If you will, decry the object of your passion, but not the passion itself.’

“‘What!’ Zuleika cried, for nothing could make her depart from falsehood, ‘Mazulim durst tell you that I loved him?’

“‘Yes, Madam.’

“‘And you believe him?’ she asked, in amazement.

“‘You will allow me to suggest’, he answered, ‘that the fact is so probable that it would be ridiculous to doubt it.’

“‘Well, yes’, she admitted; ‘yes, I loved him. I have told him so; I came here to prove it him; the ungrateful wretch has brought me to that point. I do not blush to confess it to you, but the perfidious man will never have further proofs of my frailty than my avowal to him. A day later, Heavens! what would have become of me?’

“‘Now, Madam’, the Indian said coldly; ‘do

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you suppose that Mazulim had so poor an opinion of me as to tell me only half the truth?'

" 'What can he have told you?' she asked acidly. 'Has he added calumny to his outrage, and has he been unworthy enough to . . .?'

" 'Mazulim may be indiscreet', he answered; 'but you will find it hard to persuade me that he is a liar.'

" 'Ah, the villain!' she cried; 'this is the first time I have ever been here.'

" 'Very well, if you will have it so', he replied. 'And I would rather believe Mazulim has gulled me than doubt what you tell me. But, Madam, before whom are you defending yourself? If you want to give me my deserts, I am bold enough to flatter myself that you might be less afraid of trusting me with your secrets. You are in tears? Ah! that is doing the ungrateful man too much honour. Does it become you, with your beauty, to believe that you could not have your revenge? Yes, Madam, yes; Mazulim told me everything. I know that you crowned his wishes; I even know certain details as regards his good fortune that would surprise you. Do not be offended at it', he pursued; 'his happiness was too great to be stifled: had he been less happy, less enraptured, he would no doubt have been more discreet. It is not his vanity, but his joy, that cannot hold its tongue.'

" 'Mazulim!' she put in furiously; 'ah! traitor! Mazulim is sacrificing me! Mazulim has told you all? Yet it is as well', she added in a calmer tone. 'I did not yet know what men were, and, thanks to

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his attentions, I shall have paid but one frailty for the knowledge.'

" 'Well, Madam', the Indian answered frigidly, pretending to believe her, 'that is to punish, not revenge, yourself.'

" 'No', she replied; 'no. All men are faithless, and I have made too painful a trial of them to be able to doubt it. No! they are all like Mazulim.'

" 'Ah, do not think it!' he cried. 'I dare swear to you that, if you had allowed me his place, you would never have seen him in mine.'

" 'But then', she continued, 'the orders which detain him are only an empty excuse, and he is simply throwing me over? Ah! do not be afraid of telling me so.'

" 'Well, Madam, yes', the Indian answered; 'it would be useless to disguise it from you. Mazulim no longer loves you.'

" 'He no longer loves me!' she cried dolorously. 'Ah! the blow will kill me. Ungrateful man! Is that the way he rewards my affection?'

" After saying this she made a few more exclamations, and acted tears, rage, and despair by turns. The Indian, who knew the sort of person she was, let her be, and all the time pretended to be full of admiration for her.

" 'I feel that I am dying, sir', she told him, after much weeping. 'A heart as sensitive and delicate as mine cannot be dealt such staggering blows and be immune. But what would he have done if I had deceived him?'

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“‘He would have adored you’, the Indian answered.

“‘I cannot understand such proceedings at all’, she went on. ‘I am all in the dark. If the ungrateful man no longer loved me, and was afraid to tell me so himself, could he not write to me? Could one break more shabbily with the most contemptible jade? And, again, why should he choose you to tell me?’

“‘I see only too clearly’, the Indian replied, ‘that the choice of the messenger displeases you more than the message itself, and I can swear to you, knowing as I do your unjust aversion from me, that you would not have seen me here had Mazulim named the lady to whom he begged me carry his excuses. I even doubt whether (since my feelings for you are so different from the feelings I am unfortunate enough to recognize you have for me) I should have believed him had he spoken the name Zuleika; I should never have been able to think that anyone existed who would not have found all his happiness in being loved by her. It is thus in all innocence’, he added, ‘that I have a part in giving you the most dreadful pain you can feel, and that I find myself involved in secrets which you would rather have in anyone’s hands but mine.’

“‘I do not know what makes you think that’, she answered, in an embarrassed manner. ‘Secrets or the kind you have come to possess to-day are ordinarily confided to no one; but I have no especial reasons for . . .’

“‘Excuse me, Madam’, he interrupted quickly; ‘you hate me; I am aware that at every opportunity you have raised a jest at, or most severely criticized,

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my wit, my appearance, and my way of life. I will even confess that, if I have any virtues, they are due to the wish I have always had to be worthy of your praise, or at least to oblige you to spare me those bitter strokes with which you have always assailed me since we have been in society.'

" 'I, sir?' she said flushing, 'I have never said anything at which you could be angry. Besides, we hardly know one another; you have never given me any cause for complaint, and I do not look upon myself as absurd enough to . . .'

" 'Pray let us drop the subject, Madam!' he struck in. 'You would find a longer explanation difficult. But since we are at this question, allow me but to tell you that for the feelings towards you I have always harboured (feelings which your injustice has never been able to damp) I have been more deserving of your pity than any other man, and least deserving of your hatred. Yes, Madam,' he added, 'nothing has been able to quench the unhappy love I have felt for you; your contempt, your hatred, your vindictiveness against me have made me groan, but have not cured me. I know your heart too well to delude myself into thinking that it could ever hold the feelings for me I could wish, but I hope that my discretion as to what concerns you will make you abandon your prejudice, and if your heart is so made that you can never give me your friendship, do not at least deny me your esteem.'

" Zuleika, won over by so respectful a speech, admitted that she had indeed, by a whim she had

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never been able to account for, openly declared herself his enemy; but that it was a wrong she so much expected to be able to repair that this would no longer arise between them; and she promised him her esteem, her friendship, and her gratitude.

"After having begged him to keep her secret inviolate, she rose with the intention of going out.

" 'Where are you going, Madam?' the Indian asked, holding her back. 'None of your people are here; I have sent away mine, and they are not to come back for a long time yet.'

" 'No matter', she replied; 'I cannot stay in a place where everything upbraids my weakness.'

" 'Forget Mazulim!' he went on. 'From to-day this house is no longer his; he has made it over to me: allow the man who of all the world is most truly interested in you to beg you to command everything here. At least think of what you are about to do. You cannot go out at such an hour without the risk of being met. Do not let your anger make you forget your duty to yourself! Think of the dreadful scandal you would bring about your ears, think that you would to-morrow be the gossip of all Agra, and that with a chastity and with feelings that ought to be respected, you will be believed the sort of person given to this kind of adventure.'

"Zuleika for a long time combated the arguments which Nasses (such was the Indian's name) brought up so as to make her stay. And he added:

" 'Everything here was made ready to receive you: allow me to spend the evening here with you. What

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you are, what I am myself, should be enough to answer for my behaviour. I will not lay stress upon my feelings: if I dare to refer to them again, it is merely to make you realize how much I am concerned for you, and to try to drive away those sinister thoughts which Mazulim's indiscretion seems to have awakened in you.'

"At last, after some resistance, Zuleika was over-persuaded by what Nasses said, and consented to stay.

"'With your principles, Madam', he said to her, 'you must be very astonished to find that you are so susceptible . . .'"

"Aha!" the Sultan interrupted, "he doesn't know what he is talking about; for, as far as I can make out, this is the same lady who was so vexed that Mazulim had not behaved well to her?"

"Of course it is the same one", the Sultana said.

"One moment, please", the Sultan went on. "Let us get this straight. If it is the same one, why does he say . . . you know, what he said? You see he must be making a mistake. That lady is used to having lovers, and therefore it is ridiculous for him to say that she must be very astonished."

"Do not you see that he is making a fool of her?" the Sultana queried.

"Ah, that's another matter!" the Sultan replied; "but why was I not warned? How can one be expected to guess that? That's what I should like to know."

"No doubt that is what Amanzei will tell you, if you will let him go on."

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“Very well”, the Sultan said; “what I say, you know quite well is not said because I care a fig one way or the other; one speaks for speaking’s sake, it amuses one—and for my part, I am no enemy to conversation.”

CHAPTER XIV

WHICH CONTAINS MORE WORDS THAN DEEDS

THE next day Amanzei continued thus :

“ ‘With your principles, Madam’, Nasses was saying to Zuleika, ‘you must be very astonished to find that you are so susceptible.’

“ ‘That is indeed true’, she answered; ‘and I assure you that such a thing has never happened to me before.’

“ ‘That you should have loved’, he went on, ‘is not what astonishes me. There are few women who have escaped love. But that it should be Mazulim who triumphed over your heart, that heart which seemed so little amenable to love, that, I confess, is what I cannot understand.’

“ ‘I do not understand it myself’, she answered. ‘And really, when I look into my heart, I cannot conceive how he should have been able to please and seduce me.’

“ ‘Ah, Madam!’ he cried, as though stricken to the heart, ‘what a cruel fate is ours! You love one who no longer loves you, and I love one who will never love me. Why was I always prevented from telling you how much I was hurt by the unjust aversion I knew you felt for me! Perhaps, alas! my assiduity, my constancy, my respect, would have disarmed you!’

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“ ‘And perhaps also’, she said, ‘you would have treated me as Mazulim is treating me!’ ”

“ ‘No, no!’ he answered, taking her hand; ‘no! Zuleika would have seen herself adored as religiously as she deserves.’ ”

“ ‘But’, she answered, ‘Mazulim said exactly the same things to me as you do. Why should I not believe that you would do the same things as he?’ ”

“ ‘Everything ought to make you suspect the sincerity of his feelings’, he answered. ‘Mazulim, fickle and debauched as he is, has never felt what it is to be in love. You must have known that he was more indiscreet and deceiving than even men can excuse. All the same, it is none the less true that, however unfaithful he may be, you could, without being accused of overweening pride, flatter yourself you might bind him. The difficulty of being pleasing to you, the sweet, rare joy of being sovereign in a heart no one has yet made subject, entitled you to expect an abiding love. What in anyone else would have been ridiculous vanity can have been for Zuleika only a simple idea she could not help conceiving.’ ”

“ ‘At least it goes without saying’, she answered modestly, ‘that with my principles I could expect a certain consideration.’ ”

“ ‘Consideration!’ he cried. ‘You! Ah, is consideration all that you deserve? Thus, in return for your kindness you demand only what we give to women whom we look upon as the lowest of their sex?’ ”

“ ‘Nevertheless’, she replied, ‘you see that even that demand was too heavy.’ ”

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“ ‘ If it were permitted to me to say something to you . . . ’ Nasses began again :

“ ‘ It is permitted ’, she interrupted. ‘ You cannot doubt but that what is taking place between us to-day must bind us in the tenderest friendship.’

“ ‘ Yes, Madam ’, he said with the most loving eagerness, ‘ but is it to me, to Nasses, whom she has hated so long, that Zuleika deigns promise the tenderest friendship?’

“ ‘ Yes, Nasses ’, she answered; ‘ Zuleika recognizes her unfairness, and it wrings her heart; thus she swears to repair the injury by a heartfelt confidence nothing can shake.’

“ Thereupon she looked at him gratefully; he had a very pleasant face, and, although less in the fashion than Mazulim, was in nothing his inferior.

“ ‘ What! ’ he cried again; ‘ you! *you* promise to love me?’

“ ‘ Yes ’, she replied; ‘ my heart will be an open book to you: you shall read in it as in your own. My slightest feelings, my thoughts, all, shall be known to you.’

“ ‘ Ah, Zuleika! ’ he said, casting himself on his knees, and ardently kissing her hand, ‘ how cheerfully my love will find ways to repay your kindness to me! What a pleasure it will be to unfold all my thoughts to you! Sovereign mistress of my being, your commands alone shall order my life.’

“ ‘ Enough! ’ she said with a smile. ‘ Get up! I do not like seeing you at my feet; come back to what you wanted to say to me.’

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“He rose, and seated himself beside her, still holding her hand, and continued thus :

“ ‘ I will ask you some questions, since you allow me. By what arts did Mazulim succeed in pleasing you? By what enchantment did he make the most right-thinking and right-living woman, Zuleika to wit, think him lovable? How could such a vain, feckless man commend himself to a woman as pure as you? That he should please women of his own kind, frivolous, giddy, dissipated women, who can bring themselves to love no one and yet are seduced by everyone they see, that he should please them, I say, does not surprise me; but you! ’

“ ‘ To begin the interchange of confidences which I promised you ’, Zuleika replied, ‘ I must naturally tell you that I had no fear that Mazulim could ever be dear to me. It was not that I thought myself safe from frailty. Without having ever passed through that bitter experience, as I have since done, I knew that a moment might be enough to plunge the most virtuous woman into the most hopeless depths; but, reassured by my feelings, and also by the time I had been in society without straying a hair’s-breadth from the prescribed path, I durst flatter myself that my aloofness would endure for ever.’

“ ‘ No doubt ’, Nasses remarked very gravely. ‘ Nothing entraps women more readily than the security of which you speak.’

“ ‘ That is true ’, she agreed. ‘ A woman is never in worse danger of succumbing than when she feels herself invincible. I was in this deceptive calm when

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Mazulim brought himself to my notice. I will not tell you how he managed to seduce me. All I know is that, having resisted him for a long time, my heart was moved, and my mind disturbed. I felt emotions gaining upon me, all the more so as I was unused to feeling them. Mazulim, who knew the nature of my trouble better than I did myself, took advantage of it to lead me to a step of which I did not foresee the consequences; and at last he wrought me to the point of coming here. I thought (as he promised) that he only wished to converse with me with more freedom than we could hope for in the hurly-burly of society. I came; his presence moved me more than I had thought for; alone with him I found myself less armed against his desires. Without knowing what I granted, I was able to deny him nothing. Love at length led me to the goal.'

"As she finished speaking, her eyes were half-wetted with the tears she tried to squeeze out of them. Nasses, who seemed to partake most sincerely of her affliction, in pretending to console her said the very things most calculated to bring her to despair. Above all, he laid stress on the short time Mazulim had kept her.

"'For sure', he told her, 'it is not that you lack anything which can contribute to a man's happiness, at least so one has every right to suppose. Nevertheless, if it were anyone but you, such prompt inconstancy on Mazulim's part would certainly make people think the most unflattering things.'

"To this suggestion Zuleika answered by a grimace

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which told Nasses plainly enough that she did not think she had any need to reproach herself on that score.

“ ‘ It is well known ’, Nasses went on to say, ‘ that men are so unfortunate as not to be able to enjoy even the most lovable creature without their desires ebbing; but at least they love for three months, six weeks, a fortnight even, more or less: no one has ever dreamed of leaving a woman so suddenly as Mazulim left you. It is ridiculous, horrible even: who could have imagined such a thing? Ah, Zuleika! ’ he added, ‘ I dare repeat it, you would have found me more constant.’

“ Zuleika answered that she was quite prepared to believe it, but that since she no longer wished ever to love, it was henceforth all the same to her whether men were constant or not; that she would even wish, out of her sincere friendship for him, that the love he protested for her were not real, and that she would be vastly upset if he were to retain for her feelings which she could never reward.

“ ‘ Yes ’, Nasses answered sadly, ‘ I feel the force of all you say. I find in your character all that firmness which I always feared in you, and which I could not prevent myself admiring, to my own misery. If you were less to be esteemed, I should be less to be pitied; for, in short, it would be allowable for me to imagine that, since you had loved Mazulim, it would not be impossible for you to love me also. It is a hope one could cherish with regard to any society woman without insulting her; but unluckily you are unlike

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anybody else, and your having lapsed once is no augury for the future.'

"Zuleika, who was no doubt laughing inwardly at the false idea Nasses seemed to have of her, assured him he was describing her truly, and enlarged widely upon the happy turn of mind nature had endowed her with, her reluctance to allow herself to be touched, and the coldness which matters, that were for other women the keenest pleasure, had left her in, in spite of the violent passion Mazulim had been able to arouse in her.

" 'So much the worse for you, Madam', Nasses told her. 'The more you are to be esteemed, the more you are to be pitied. Your lack of susceptibility will be the great sorrow of your life. The vision of Mazulim will always be before you. The memory of the humiliating way in which he jilted you will not leave you for a moment: it is a torture which will overwhelm you when you are by yourself, and which dissipation and the pleasures of society will never be able to chase effectually away.'

" 'But what am I to do', she asked him, 'to wipe so bitter a remembrance from my mind? I agree with you that a new love could blot out the memory of Mazulim; but, without taking into account the fresh sorrows it might bring, can I believe that my heart could surrender far enough to ensure my being cured? No, Nasses, believe me; self-respecting women can never love twice.'

" 'You are wrong there', he cried; 'I know some who have loved more than half a dozen times, and

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think no less of themselves for it. Besides, you have come to such a wretched pass that you are above the proprieties; and if your adventure were public, though you were known to have ten lovers at once, it would be said that even so you were not equalizing matters.'

" 'Those who said so would certainly be very tolerant', she said with a smile.

" 'Not at all', he insisted. 'It would be accepted much more simply than you think. At all events you must not suppose that I am in favour of your taking them, since one only would be enough to kill me with grief.'

" 'Ah!' Zuleika mused, 'you see we are considered so much to blame when we love only once, with a single-hearted and constant passion, and even then we hardly escape contempt: and such is our hard lot that what in you is looked upon as a virtue is in us accounted a vice.'

" 'Yes, people were used to think that', he answered; 'but manners having changed, our notions have changed with them. Oh! if it were only the fear of being blamed that restrained you, you would abandon yourself to love.'

" 'At bottom', she said, 'you are right. For why should one's heart not be occupied? In the last analysis, I do not see the least harm in it.'

" 'And yet', he replied, 'with a keen mind which enables you to distinguish admirably between right and wrong, you bow to prejudice just like a person who cannot reason. There you are, determined to

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spend your life in denying your weakness with Mazulim, instead of wisely thinking of consoling yourself, because you think that a self-respecting woman should love only once. Yet you inwardly feel the principle upon which you are modelling your behaviour to be a false one; you are really denying the light that is in you so as to enjoy the noble pleasures of affliction, and also, apparently, that people may always say that you cannot outlive your sorrow at losing Mazulim. What fine things to have said about one!

“‘About me!’ she retorted. ‘I flatter myself that no one will say anything about me.’

“‘You may well do so’, he answered. ‘I know that you, Madam, will divulge nothing of all this; it is equally certain that I shall say nothing about it, and it does Mazulim so little honour that his silence is ensured; and yet, if you do not change your point of view, everyone is sure to know about it.’

“‘But why?’ she asked.

“‘Egad!’ he answered, ‘do you think that people will see you looking mournful without trying to find out why you are so; and that if people try doggedly enough they will not succeed? Do you suppose that Mazulim himself, whose vanity your sorrow will tickle, will be able to resist the pleasure of telling everybody that his jilting you is the cause of it?’

“‘That is true’, she said; ‘but, Nasses, does it depend upon me whether I am sad or not?’

“‘Of course it depends upon you’, he replied. ‘In reality, what do you regret now? Mazulim? If he were to come back to you, would you receive him?’

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“ ‘I?’ she cried, ‘ah! I would rather give myself to the most despicable of men than be his.’ ”

“ ‘Thus if nothing he could do would reinstate him in your heart’, he went on, ‘it is very ridiculous of you to weep for him.’ ”

“Just wait a moment”, the Sultan begged; “is there much more of this sort of thing?”

“Yes, Sire”, Amanzei answered.

“By Mahomet! I’m sorry to hear it”, Shah Baham replied; “it is just conversations like these which give me the most dreadful spleen, I warn you frankly. If you could leave them out, or at least shorten them, it would be a great relief to me, and I should not be ungrateful.”

“You are wrong to complain”, the Sultana told him. “This conversation, which you find tedious, is, so to speak, in itself action. It is not a useless digression, leading nowhere, it is action . . . in dialogue is it called?” she asked Amanzei, with a smile.

“Yes, Madam”, he answered.

“It is a very pleasing way of treating things”, she went on. “It better and more broadly describes the characters in play, but it has certain drawbacks. In trying to make everything profound, or to catch every subtlety, one risks straying into minor details, in themselves agreeable enough, but not important enough to linger over; and those who listen are wearied with details long drawn out. To know exactly where to stop short is perhaps harder than to invent. The Sultan is wrong to wish you to go faster at this

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particular point, but I should think you wrong, and so would every person of taste, if an unruly verbosity were to carry you away, and if you were not now and again to sacrifice even what seem to you the most delightful bits when you could tell them only to the detriment of what we want to hear."

"The Sultan is wrong!" Shah Baham remarked. "That's easy to say. As for me, I maintain that this fellow Amanzei is nothing but a babbler, who mirrors himself in all he says, and who, if I know anything at all about it, is addicted to the vice of liking long tirades and playing the clever wit. That may offend you", he added, turning towards Amanzei, "yet I am only being plain with you, and if you were to be so with me, I bet you would admit I am right."

"Yes, Sire", Amanzei answered; "and, apart from a courtier's complaisance, I am all the more inclined to agree since I have long since been found fault with for the very defect your Majesty upbraids me with."

"Then cure yourself of it!" Shah Baham said.

"If it were as easy to cure myself of it as to admit it", Amanzei replied, "your Majesty would not have had to take me to task for it." And he continued:

"The force of Nasses's argument had a great effect upon Zuleika.

"'At bottom you are right', she said to him; 'and thus it is not Mazulim I weep for, it is for my own frailty, it is for having given myself to a man so unworthy of me.'

"'I admit', Nasses answered ingenuously, 'that

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the trick he is playing off on you cannot make him appear agreeable to you: nevertheless, if you were to judge him without bias, I believe you would see certain good qualities in him, for I assure you he has some.'

" 'I will judge him, if you like', she replied disdainfully. 'To begin with, he is not well built.'

" 'Perhaps not', he answered. 'But yet nobody is more graceful than he; he has a fine head, and the finest leg in the world, an easy, noble carriage, and a lively, bright, and entertaining mind.'

" 'Oh, yes', she conceded, 'I do not deny that he is a pretty enough bauble; but, after all, he is only that; and, besides, I assure you that he is far from being as amusing as they make out. Between ourselves, he is a presumptuous, fatuous, complacent . . .'

" 'I can forgive a man for being a little proud at having won you', Nasses interrupted; 'people puff themselves up for less every day.'

" 'But, Nasses', she complained, 'for a man who says he loves me, and apparently wants me to believe him, your remarks strike me as most singular.'

" 'Odious as Mazulim may seem to you', Nasses answered, 'he is all the same less so than I am, and I believe I should be more of a fool to speak to you of a lover whom you will never love than of one whom you have loved so tenderly. He still occupies your mind so painfully that I never utter his name without your eyes filling with tears; at this very moment they are welling over on account of my having done so, and you vainly try to hide it from me. Ah! crush

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back your tears, charming Zuleika!’ he cried; ‘they stab me to the heart! I cannot, without a soft feeling which is undoing me, see them flow from your eyes.’

“Zuleika, who had felt not the least inclination to cry for a long while past, could not help thinking, on hearing these words, that she ought to shed some tears. Nasses, who was highly diverted at all the antics he was making her go through to the top of his bent, left her awhile in this factitious woe. Nevertheless, so as not to waste his time while he was with her, he occupied himself in bestowing kisses upon her breast, which was generously exposed. For some time she did not vouchsafe to notice what he was doing, and it was only after she had left him completely free for a while that she found it proper to object.

“‘How unthinking you are, Nasses’, she said, still holding her handkerchief to her eyes; ‘truly, I am pained by these liberties.’

“‘Naturally’, he answered, ‘I could not expect you to welcome them. Look at me’, he added, ‘so that I can see your eyes.’

“‘No!’ she replied; ‘they have wept too much to be worth looking at.’

“‘Without your tears’, he declared, ‘you would seem less lovely to me. Listen to me’, he continued; ‘your present state wrings my heart: I want you above all things to rise superior to it. I have proved to you how essential it is for you to love again, and I will, as far as I can, now prove to you that it is me whom you ought to love.’

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“ ‘ I much doubt of your success ’, she answered.

“ ‘ That we shall see ’, he went on. ‘ In the first place you admit that you hated me for no reason at all: that wrong you can only right by loving me madly. (She smiled.) Moreover ’, he continued, ‘ I love you; and, although it would be easy for you to make anybody inclined to fall in love with you, even more than you might wish, you will never find anybody so ready as I am to love you with all the affection you deserve. Rightly or wrongly, we do certainly, on the whole, think ill of women: we are convinced that they are neither faithful nor devoted, and arguing from that, we believe that we have no call to be faithful or devoted to them. Thus we hardly ever see real passion; to make us determine to have one, we must be sure that a woman is worthy of feelings less light than those we usually bestow upon her: we must scrutinize her character and her way of living and thinking, and regulate by them the amount of esteem we can lay at her feet . . . ’

“ ‘ Well ’, she interrupted, ‘ what prevents you? ’

“ ‘ That is raillery, Madam ’, he replied. ‘ Such a study takes time; while we are about it a woman will forestall us by her inconstancy; and that is so heartrending an event for us that, to avoid it, we often leave her without knowing whether she might deserve a longer attachment.’

“ ‘ But ’, she asked, ‘ how can you think this to be an argument in your favour? ’

“ ‘ This is it ’, he answered; ‘ but must you keep your handkerchief to your eyes everlastingly? ’

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“ ‘Have I not looked at you?’ she said.

“ ‘Not enough’, he contended. ‘I do not want to see that handkerchief any more: it will make me hate you, if possible, as much as you used to hate me.’

“ Thereupon she smiled at him, affectionately enough.

“ ‘Go on then’, she said, leaning against him.

“ ‘Yes’, he replied, clasping her in his arms, ‘I will go on; do not be afraid. What I have seen of you here’, he pursued, ‘is equivalent to the study of which I spoke; it has captivated all my esteem, and thus has doubled my love for you. No one else can love you as much as I do; another would be conscious only of your charms, and the beauty of your soul would be a thing he never could be sure of, because nothing could have shown him how exquisitely delicate your feelings are. He will find that out, you will say, by seeing how you behave: ah! Madam, I must speak ill of my sex—do you think that a flighty, dissipated man, without morals, especially where women are concerned, can find a better way of assuring his constant scorn for them than by always refusing them the honour of scrutiny: do you think, I say, that he notices the things which ought to win his esteem, or that he will not accuse you of gilding your character, and clothing yourself before him in virtues which you do not possess?’

“ ‘Yes, I can well believe it’, she agreed. ‘Nothing could be more sensible than the things you have said.’

“ Nasses, to thank her for her commendation, was first of all about to kiss her hand; but Zuleika’s

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mouth being closer, he thought it just as well to testify his gratitude thereon.

“‘ Ah, Nasses!’ she said gently, ‘ we shall fall out.’

“‘ You see clearly’, he went on, without taking any notice of this, ‘ that, since I esteem you more than anyone else in the whole world, having the most reason for doing so, I am the only man you can possibly love.’

“‘ No’, she replied; ‘ love is too dangerous.’

“‘ That’, he retorted, ‘ is a mere piece of operatic fudge, so stale and flat that nowadays no one would stomach it even in a paper of verses, and which, moreover, would not in the least prevent your loving me, I can tell you that.’

“‘ If that would not prevent me . . .’ she answered; ‘ but why do you ask for love? Have I not promised you friendship?’

“‘ Of course’, he replied, ‘ that would mean a noble-minded struggle for you. Naturally, if I did not love you, I would demand nothing further from you, perhaps less; but my feelings for you can be met only by the warmest reciprocation, and I swear that I will omit nothing to make you feel all the ardour I ask of you.’

“‘ I for my part’, she retorted, ‘ protest that I will omit nothing to protect myself from it.’

“‘ Aha!’ he said, ‘ you are going to take precautions against me; I am delighted, for that is a proof that I am dangerous to you. You are right. Loving you as I do, I should be more so for you than

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anyone else is. With a less estimable woman than you, I would not be so sure of my victory.'

" 'Yet,' she replied, 'the more estimable I am, the more I shall resist.'

" 'Quite the contrary', he answered. 'Only flirts are difficult: they are easily persuaded that they are made to be loved, but they are not so easily caught, and the most easy conquests are those over moderate, thinking women.'

" 'I should never have thought so', she said.

" 'Nothing, however, is more true', he continued. 'You cannot, I know, doubt that I love you. Answer me! Do you doubt it? Be honest!'

" 'I have just been so foolishly credulous', she answered, 'that I think it will be a very long time before I can be persuaded of anybody's love.'

" 'But leaving Mazulim aside', he insisted, 'what do you think?'

" She answered that she believed he did not altogether dislike her; he persisted, and at last brought her to admit that she was sure he loved her.

" 'And you', he pressed her on, 'you do not find me odious any longer?'

" 'Odious!' she exclaimed, 'oh no, not odious. I may be inclined to indifference, but I do not wish to be unfair.'

" 'You believe that I love you?' he cried; 'and you do not loathe me, and yet you imagine that you can resist me for long, you, with your sincere nature? You deceive yourself with thinking that you could make me miserable, whereas your own desires will

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“speak in my favour? That you will fix a date for yielding, which will be when you think the time has come when you can give yourself without impropriety? No, Zuleika, no! I have a better opinion of you than you have of yourself. You could not be so insincere as to drive a man you love to despair: you are innocent of the horrible art of leading me on from favour to favour, to the one which must for ever crown and revive my desires; the moment I shall melt you will be the one when I shall die with pleasure in your arms, and that charming mouth . . .” he added rapturously. . .”

“Good! Good!” the Sultan broke in; “you relieve me of terrible tortures. Upon my life, I began to think it was never going to happen. Oh, what a stupid creature that Zuleika was, with all her hishings and pishings!”

“Indeed”, the Sultana said, “one must admit that favours cannot be withheld longer than that. Think of it! To resist for a whole hour! that has no parallel.”

“The truth of the matter is”, the Sultan answered, “I found the business as tedious as if it had lasted a fortnight; and, if Amanzei had drawn it out a moment longer, I should have died of the spleen and the vapours: but not before it would have cost him his life. I would have taught him to make a crowned head die of tedium.”

CHAPTER XV

WHICH WILL NOT AMUSE SUCH AS HAVE FOUND THE
PREVIOUS ONE WEARISOME

“ FROM the silence which supervened at the moment which so much gratified your Majesty yesterday, I gathered that Nasses was preventing Zuleika from speaking, and that she was preventing him from going on talking.

“ ‘ Ah, Nasses ! ’ she cried as soon as she could, ‘ think what you are doing ! If you loved me . . . ’

“ The more Nasses feared Zuleika’s reproaches, the less chance he gave her of making any. I have never understood, so well as I did at that moment, how useful it is to be headstrong with women.

“ ‘ But listen to me ’, Zuleika was saying ; ‘ do listen to me ! Do you want me to hate you ? ’

“ These words, being intermittently and feebly spoken, had little force, and no effect at all. Zuleika clearly saw that it would be useless for her to speak further to a man lost in rapture, and to whom the finest things in the world would have been said fruitlessly. What was she to do ? Why, just what she did. After taking due precautions against the attempts which Nasses, disordered by his emotions, was hazarding with the greatest temerity, and having made everything safe in this respect, she waited patiently

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for him to be in a fit state to listen to what she had to say to him upon his impertinent behaviour. Nasses, meanwhile, either to make her grant an easier pardon, or because Zuleika had really stirred him, freed her only to relapse upon her breast, and that in a state of collapse in which he can have been conscious only of his own condition. This made it all the more difficult for Zuleika; for what is the good of speaking to anyone who cannot hear? The only thing which could at this juncture have made less painful the silence enforced upon her was that Nasses did not seem to be enough in command of his wits to be able to use it for his own comments. Nevertheless, she tried to withdraw herself altogether from his arms, but failed. And when he had recovered from his stupor he looked so affectionate! His first glances strayed so touchingly over Zuleika! He closed his eyes so languorously, fetched such profound sighs, that far from being able to show as much anger at him as she had promised herself she would, she began, in spite of her natural insusceptibility, to feel moved, and to share his transports. Our virtuous lady would have been undone had Nasses been able to notice the feelings which wrought upon her. At last, brought back to himself, he seized Zuleika's hand.

“ ‘Nasses!’ she said angrily, ‘do you think that that is the way to make me love you?’ ”

“Nasses sought to excuse the violence of his ardour by saying that it had not allowed him to be punctilious. Zuleika argued that love, when it is sincere, is always accompanied by respect, and that

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people only had such ill-regulated manners as he had been guilty of with people they despise. He on his side maintained that one showed lack of respect only to those people for whom one felt passion, and that his being carried away, which Zuleika was determined to blame him for, was the very thing which ought to prove to her how much he loved her.

“ ‘ If I esteemed you less ’, he pursued, ‘ I would have asked you for what I seized ; but, trifling as are the favours I stole from you, I was aware that you would refuse them. If I had been sure of being granted them, I would not have thought it necessary to rely on myself alone for them. The better one thinks of a woman, the more one is compelled to make oneself guilty of too much boldness in her eyes, and that is the truth.’

“ ‘ I do not believe a word of all that ’, Zuleika answered. ‘ But even if there were any truth in what you have just said, still, it is an invariable rule that one does not begin declaring one’s feelings in such very odd ways as you have done.’

“ ‘ Even if I had pushed matters so briskly as you say I have ’, he replied, ‘ it would still be a compliment for which you ought to thank me.’

“ ‘ No ’, she resumed pettishly, ‘ your head is full of the most unheard of fantastical notions.’

“ ‘ It is entertaining to think ’, he retorted, ‘ that those very opinions you dub fantastical are all based on reason. The one you are upbraiding me with now is extremely sound, as I shall make you see, for not only have you a ready wit, you have a balanced one

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as well, a virtue so rare in women that I must congratulate you upon it.'

" 'That compliment does not make me relent', she said sternly. 'And I warn you that I shall treat it as it deserves.'

" 'It really makes me very uneasy', he answered, 'to see you so little affected by the graceful things I am saying to you.'

" 'In short, sir', she stopped him, 'allow me to tell you that before you undertake certain things, you must first of all persuade.'

" 'I follow you, Madam', he took up. 'You want me to ruin your reputation. Very well then, I will. I wanted to make it possible for you to love me without anyone in the world suspecting it, but since my delicacy in the matter displeases you, I will be of use to you in another way, Madam. It will be public that I am in love with you, and I will spare you none of those tender indiscretions which will inform the world what my feelings for you are.'

" 'Why, what do you mean?' she asked. 'You are indeed a strange man! You are guilty of an impertinence towards me I ought never to forgive, and you say it is out of respect for me; you tumble me as though I were a woman who is beneath contempt, and you declare that it is because you are infinitely solicitous of all that concerns me! You do a thousand unpardonable things, and then you say it is I who am in the wrong! For Heaven's sake explain yourself to me!'

" 'If you were more experienced in love', he answered, 'you would spare me all these explanations.'

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Nevertheless, I say, although you may find them very uncomfortable, I would, I assure you, a thousand times rather give you lessons on this subject than find you so schooled as not to need them. Have you still to learn that it is far less the kindnesses a woman shows her lover that bring her down than the time she takes over granting them? Do you think that I could love you unhappily without my attentions to you, the efforts I should make to soften your heart, attracting notice? I should grow melancholy; and, were I unthinkably discreet, it would be known that it was your severity that made me woe-begone. Do you suppose that whatever guard I might put upon myself, that your eyes, my eyes, that sweet intimacy which, in spite of all our efforts, would grow up between us, would not discover our secret?’

“ By her astonished silence Zuleika seemed to agree with what Nasses said.

“ ‘ You see clearly ’, he went on, ‘ that when I beg you to make me promptly happy, it is for your sake rather than for mine. If you follow my advice, if you spare me tortures, you also save yourself from the buzz which always accompanies the beginnings of an affair. Moreover, having been together in this situation, I could not, without letting the cat out of the bag, begin to show that I loved you. But, if we were agreed, we could deceive the public as to our relations as much as we thought fit; believing that you hate me, it would never imagine that you could so rapidly have passed to love from a feeling so contrary to it. And then it will be easy for you to bring

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about our reconciliation naturally. At Court, or at the Crown Princess's, where we shall meet, you will seize upon some opportunity or other of showing me some civility; do not fear that it will not arise: I will manage it. I will eagerly respond to your advance, and will loudly declare my wish that you should no longer hate me. I will even get some common friend to suggest that you should see me; you will be quite agreeable; I shall be brought to your house, and I shall come to see you again, and proclaim how pleasant it is to know you, and how unfortunate I was to have been outcast so long. Nothing more will be needed to account for my attentions; they will seem quite simple and natural, and we shall get all the more delight from our love in hiding it from everybody.'

" 'No', she answered thoughtfully. 'If I were to make you happy so promptly, I should fear your inconstancy. I confess I should not be averse from your entering into a friendship with me which was based on more confidence and real affection than is ordinarily to be met with in society. I will go further: I would not be an enemy to love if a lover asked nothing more of a woman than to be told she loved him.'

" 'What you ask', he said tenderly, 'is more difficult with you than with any other woman imaginable. I also confess that one would be prouder to have so much from you than all from anybody else. But believe me, Zuleika, I adore you, you love me, so make happy the man who feels the greatest passion for you.'

" 'If you could limit your desires', she said, as

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though very moved, 'and if what one granted you did not seem to give you the right to demand more, I might try to make you less unhappy: but . . .'

" 'Oh, Zuleika!' he broke in hastily, 'my obedience will satisfy you.'

" Upon this promise, which Zuleika clearly felt to be a precarious one, as indeed it was, she leaned carelessly against Nasses, who, casting himself upon her, inconsiderately took advantage of all the favours he had just been granted.

" 'Ah, Zuleika!' he murmured a minute later, 'must I owe such sweet moments to your complaisance only, and do you not wish them to be as sweet for you as they are for me?'

" Zuleika did not answer, but Nasses complained no more. Soon he communicated all his flame to Zuleika's soul. He shortly forgot the promise he had made her, and she did not remember what she had pledged him to. It is true that she objected, but so gently, that the objection which escaped from her lips was more like a tender sigh than a reproof. Nasses, sensible of how rapt she was becoming, thought he ought not to waste such a precious opportunity.

" 'Ah, Nasses!' she said in a smothered voice, 'if you do not love me, how pitiable you will have made me!'

" Even if Zuleika's fears as to Nasses's love were as sincere and real as they seemed to be, it looked as though Nasses's transports would have dissolved them. Thus, almost convinced that she could not much longer doubt of his ardour, he did not see fit to waste

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in answering her the time which he meant to use in reassuring her, and much more forcibly than the most touching speeches could ever have done. Zuleika was not offended by his silence; soon even (for often the merest trifles are enough to make us forget the most important things) she seemed to take no more account of a fear which it seemed to her she could no longer retain without giving Nasses mortal offence. Other notions, no doubt softer ones, supervened. She tried to speak, but could only mutter some disconnected words, which seemed but to express the discomposure of her soul.

"When he had done, Nasses threw himself on his knees beside her.

" 'Ah, let me be!' she said, repelling him feebly.

" 'What!' he answered in astonishment, 'can I have been so unlucky as to displease you, and can it be possible that you can complain of me in any way?'

" 'If I do not complain', she replied, 'it is not that I have no cause to.'

" 'And what would you complain of?' he pursued. 'Ought you not to be tired of such cruel opposition?'

" 'I admit', she said, 'that many women would have yielded sooner; but none the less I think that I should have resisted you longer.'

" Then she looked at him with that cloudy, languorous look in the eyes which both betrays and excites desire.

" 'Do you love me?' Nasses asked her, as emotionally as if he had loved her himself.

" 'Ah, Nasses!' she cried, 'what pleasure would

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you get from an avowal your furious actions have already wrested from me? Have you left me anything to say?’

“ ‘Yes, Zuleika’, he answered. ‘Without that charming confession I crave from you, I cannot be happy: without it I can never regard myself as anything but a ravisher. Ah! will you leave me with such a cruel reproach to gnaw my breast?’

“ ‘Yes, Nasses’, she said sighing, ‘I love you.’

“Nasses was about to thank Zuleika, when Mazulim’s slave came in with the supper; he fumed at it . . .”

“Egad! I should think so”, the Sultan interrupted. “There you have servants all over. One never sees them except when one least wants them. There was no fear of his coming in when Nasses and Zuleika were wearying me so dreadfully. He must come and interrupt just when I should have liked to hear what they had to say.”

“Indeed”, the Sultana said, “I was surprised at your saying nothing.”

“Zoons!” he retorted, “I took care not to disturb them; I was far too anxious to know how it would all end. I am highly satisfied”, he added, turning round to Amanzei; “that is what may be called a touching situation; my eyes are still full of tears.”

“What?” the Sultana asked him; “does that make you cry?”

“Why not?” he answered. “It is very affecting, unless I am gravely mistaken. It seemed as good as a tragedy to me, and if it doesn’t make you cry, that is because you are not kind-hearted.”

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After delivering what he considered a biting epigram at the Sultana's expense, he very complacently gave Amanzei orders to go on, which he did as follows :

"Nasses sighed at being interrupted: not that he was in love, but he was possessed by that impatience, that ardour, which, without being love, produces in us emotions which resemble it, and which women invariably look upon as signs of a true passion, either because they know how necessary it is for them to seem convinced with us, or that they really know no better. Zuleika, who gave her charms all the credit for the impatience she observed in Nasses, was extremely grateful for it; but to maintain her part of 'reserved woman' which she had undertaken to play, she informed him by a pressure of the hand that they were to be circumspect in front of Mazulim's slave. They sat down to supper.

"After supper was over . . ."

"Gently, gently, if you please!" Shah Baham broke in. "If it's all the same to you, I would like to see them at supper. I like table-talk above all things:"

"What a singularly inconsequent mind you have!" the Sultana said to him. "You have girded a dozen times at necessary conversations, and now you insist upon hearing one which has no connection with the story, and can only draw it out."

"Well", the Sultan answered, "if I want to be inconsequent, is there anyone who can stop me? See here; I wish it to be known that a Sultan can use his mind as he pleases; that all my ancestors had the

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very privilege which is now being called in question; that a blue-stocking has never been allowed to prevent them speaking as they wished, and that even my grandmother, with whom I do not think you will have the audacity to compare yourself, was never allowed to contradict Shah Riar, my ancestor, son of Shah Mahmoun, who begat Shah Tekni, who . . . all of which I may say by the bye", he continued more moderately, "merely to let you see that I know my family tree, rather than to annoy anyone, and you may go on, Amanzei."

"'It is', Zuleika said, as soon as she sat down to supper, 'very curious how the most important events of our lives are brought about. Whosoever would tell a woman "To-night you will madly love a man whom not only have you never thought of as a lover, but whom you even hate" would not be believed. And yet, the case is not without parallel.'

"'I can answer for that', Nasses took up; 'and I should be very vexed if it did not happen. Moreover, nothing is more common than to see women fall violently in love with somebody they have never seen before, or whom they have loathed. That is even how the deepest passions are born.'

"'And yet', she continued, 'you will meet people, nay, many of them, who say there is no such thing as love at first sight.'

"'Do you know', Nasses answered, 'who the people are who say that? They are either youngsters who know nothing of life, or women who are prudish and cold: those indolent women who never give a

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loose to their feelings without hedging themselves about with every precaution, who warm up by degrees, and make you pay heavily for a heart which always contains more remorse than affection, and whom you never enjoy completely.'

" 'Well!' she replied, 'those women, with all their absurdity, are much approved of; and I myself, till quite lately, was of their mind.'

" 'You!' he protested. 'But do you know, you have every conceivable prejudice?'

" 'That may well be', she answered. 'But now I have one less, for I believe in sudden love.'

" 'As for me', he said, 'I know that it is very common. I even know a woman who is so subject to it that she experiences it three or four times a day.'

" 'Ah, Nasses! that is impossible now', she cried.

" 'If you were to say merely that it is not usual', he went on, 'do you know you would still be wrong, and that a woman who is unfortunate enough to be born very tender-hearted (if it be a misfortune) cannot answer for herself from one minute to another? Now, supposing you felt an absolute necessity for love, what would you do?'

" 'I would love you', she answered.

" 'Well then, now imagine a woman who feels an absolute necessity for loving three or four men every day.'

" 'She would be much to be pitied', she said.

" 'Very well, I agree, but what would you have her do? Run away, you will tell me? But you cannot

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run far in a room; when you have walked up and down it a few times you are tired, and must needs sit down again. The person who has struck you is ever present to your eyes. Your desires are exacerbated by your resistance, and the need for being loved, far from being diminished, has only become more acute.'

" 'But', she answered, as though in a dream; 'to love four of them!'

" 'Since the number upsets you', he replied, 'I will deduct two.'

" 'Ah! she said', that seems more likely, even possible.'

" 'Yet', he cried, 'what a to-do you have made about loving only one!'

" 'Be quiet', she said, smiling at him; 'I cannot imagine where you get all your arguments from, nor where I get my answers.'

" 'From nature', he answered her. 'You are frank and artless, you love me enough not to wish to hide your thoughts from me, and I love you all the more for it, seeing that there are so few women who care for truth as you do.'

" With these remarks, and a few others no more interesting, Nasses succeeded in tiding over the time until dessert. No sooner was it put before them, and they were left alone, than he got up impulsively, and throwing himself at Zuleika's feet, asked her:

" 'You do love me?'

" 'Have I not told you so often enough?' she answered languorously.

" 'Heavens!' he cried, rising and taking her in

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his arms, 'can I hear you say so often enough, and can you prove it to me too thoroughly?'

"'Ah, Nasses!' she replied, allowing herself to relapse into his arms, 'how you abuse my weakness!'"

"And what the devil did she want him to do with it?" the Sultan said. "That's too bad of her! I think she would have been very nettled if he had left her alone. No, women are too queer . . . very queer indeed! They never know what they want. One never knows where one is with them, and . . ."

"What anger!" the Sultana interrupted. "What a torrent of epigrams! What have we done to you, I should like to know?"

"No", the Sultan answered, "I am saying all this quite coolly. Need one be angry with women to think them absurd?"

"You are caustic beyond parallel", the Sultana told him. "And I fear that you who hate wits so much are about to become an incorrigible one yourself."

"It's that Zuleika who has vexed me!" the Sultan retorted. "I don't like ill-placed mannerisms."

"May your Majesty be pleased to be less incensed against her", Amanzei said; "she is not going to keep them up for long."

CHAPTER XVI

WHICH CONTAINS A DISSERTATION WHICH WILL NOT APPEAL TO EVERYONE

"AFTER she had said those few words which displeased your Majesty, Zuleika said no more.

" 'Do you think', Nasses asked her at last, 'that Mazulim loved you better than I do?'

" 'He praised me more', she answered; 'but it seems to me that you love me better.'

" 'I will give you no excuse for doubting my affection', he replied. 'Yes, Zuleika, you will soon know how short of mine Mazulim's feelings fell.'

" 'Eh, what?' she said. 'What?'

" Nasses did not give her time to conclude, and she did not complain at having been interrupted.

" 'Ah, Nasses!' she cried dotingly, 'how tenderly you deserve to be loved!'

" Nasses answered this eulogy only as a man does who thinks he would be less praised for his present performance if it were not to encourage him to greater prowess. He had softened Zuleika; he ended by astonishing her—thus she conceived a great regard for him, almost a respect, which, in view of the origin to which he owed them, became very agreeable, for they must always flatter a man, especially as with women they are not the result of frustration, as the

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emotions are. Nasses, well satisfied with himself, thought he might allow Zuleika's admiration to relax. It was nothing to him that he had overcome her, he knew her too well to be flattered by that, and the kindness she had shown him, far from diminishing his hatred for her, only increased it. He felt for her that deep scorn which it is impossible for us to hide from the people for whom we feel it, or to varnish over; and in this condition of mind he did not think he could too soon show her the contempt her conduct had aroused in him.

" 'So you find', he asked her, 'that I do not praise you as much as Mazulim did?'

" 'Yes', she answered; 'but at the same time I find you know more about love than he does.'

" 'That is a subtlety I cannot understand', he went on. 'What meaning do you at the moment give to the word love?'

" 'The one it has', she retorted. 'It only has one that I know of, and that is the only one I claim to speak about. But why do you, who seem to love so well, ask me what love is?'

" 'If I ask', he replied, 'it is not that I do not know; but, as everybody defines the emotion differently according to his nature, I want to know what especially you meant when you said I loved you better than Mazulim. I cannot understand what the difference is that you make between him and me if you do not tell me what his way of loving was.'

" 'Why', she answered, pretending to blush, 'his heart is outworn.'

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“ ‘His heart is outworn!’ he repeated. ‘That is an expression which, to my thinking, means nothing in particular. No doubt the heart gets worn out when an affair goes on too long; but Mazulim could not have been like that with you, since you were new both to his eye and to his mind. Therefore, what you are telling me about him is not what I want to know.’

“ ‘Nevertheless’, she retorted, ‘that is all I shall tell. What I know about him is that there are few men less made for loving than he is (or so I suppose); and do not ply me with any more questions about him, for on that point I have nothing more to say.’

“ ‘Ah, now I understand you’, he answered. ‘All the same I do not recognize Mazulim in the picture you give me of him.’

“ ‘But’, she protested, ‘it seems to me that I am not telling you anything about him.’

“ ‘I beg your pardon!’ he took up. ‘One can easily guess what you are accusing a man of when you say his heart is worn out; it is a decorous and polite expression, but quite well understood. Yet I am surprised that you have had to complain of him.’

“ ‘I am not complaining, Nasses’, she replied. ‘But, since you want to know what I think of him, I must tell you that as a matter of fact I also was very surprised.’

“ ‘Ho, ho!’ he said; ‘what now? You found him . . .?’

“ ‘It is astonishing’, she agreed. ‘At least I believe he is.’

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“ ‘ Oh, I am quite prepared to take your word for it.’

“ ‘ Naturally ’, she answered ironically; ‘ I have such vast experience!’

“ ‘ Experience or not ’, he replied, ‘ everyone knows what a lover ought to be like when one has been good enough to leave him no more to ask for; on that matter tradition is clear. But I must confess once more that you surprise me, for Mazulim . . .’

“ ‘ And really, Nasses ’, she interrupted, ‘ to such a degree that you can hardly imagine it.’

“ ‘ I cannot get over my astonishment ’, he answered. ‘ I know of some unbelievable prodigies he has accomplished.’

“ ‘ No doubt he himself told you about them ’, she said.

“ ‘ If only out of self-respect ’, he declared, ‘ I should suspect a tale told me in that way. No, he has told me nothing of the sort, and, what is more, he is really modest on that score.’

“ ‘ Modest ’, she replied, ‘ he cannot be; perhaps, however, he is sometimes truthful about it.’

“ ‘ Madam! Madam!’ he said, ‘ such a brilliant reputation as Mazulim’s must have some foundation, and you will never induce me to believe that a man of whom all the women in Agra think so highly can be so despicable a fellow.’

“ ‘ But ’, she argued, ‘ do you suppose that any woman who was dissatisfied with Mazulim (if indeed there can be any who are affected by what we are talking about) would breathe a word to anyone as to why she was so dissatisfied with him?’

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“ ‘Precisely yes’, he replied: ‘she would not tell everyone, but she would tell someone, and the proof of that is, here are you telling me. I am aware that I owe this confidence only to our peculiar relations. But Mazulim has attracted others besides you. After loving him, they have loved others, to whom, no doubt, they confided their adventures. In Agra there are perhaps a thousand women who have found Mazulim irresistible: thus there must be forty thousand men, or thereabouts, who know, with great accuracy, what he is, and you expect a secret of this sort to be buried away among these piqued ladies and envious gentlemen? That is hardly likely. No, Madam—once more No; a man such as Mazulim seemed to you to be could not have imposed upon everybody for so long. Shall I tell you another thing? You know Telmissa? She is certainly no longer either young or beautiful. It is only three days ago at most that Mazulim proved his esteem for her to the full, and deserved and acquired hers. That at any rate is a fact. Telmissa declares it to whomsoever likes to listen, and she is not given to saying good of a man without due cause, and we men know of no woman whose praises do us greater credit or which are harder to come by. Can you think ill of Mazulim after that?’

“ ‘No’, she answered drily; ‘I believe he is incomparable. It is doubtless my fault’, she added, with a disdainful smile, ‘that I have not found him so.’

“ ‘I am not prepared to take that view’, he continued, ‘but you must admit that it seems incon-

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ceivable. And, besides, though you may not believe it, if I were a woman, people of the kind you took Mazulim for would please me much more than the others.'

" 'I do not see', she agreed, 'that that would be a reason for not wanting them, or for leaving them; but I must confess that I do not see upon what ground they are to be preferred.'

" 'They love better', he said. 'They alone understand delicacy, consideration. The more they feel they are being handsomely treated by being loved, the more eagerly they try to deserve it. Necessarily subservient, they are slaves rather than lovers. Sensual and refined they are for ever inventing compensations, and perhaps to them are due love's most recondite delights. If they are transported, it is not to the vehemence of a blind passion, which is therefore not flattering to a woman, that they owe the ardour which fills his heart: it is she alone, her charms alone, that conquer nature. Can she ever know a sweeter, a more real triumph?'

" 'Your opinions are all so perverse that what you say does not surprise me', Zuleika said.

" 'You think too correctly to think this one perverse', he answered; 'and I know more than one woman who . . .'

" 'Let us quit this conversation', she interrupted. 'I have never cared to argue about things which do not concern me. In any case, as far as I can see, it is for Mazulim rather than for you to gain consent to this opinion.' "

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"Quite right", the Sultan said. "When is she going away?"

"How impatient you are!" the Sultana remarked.

"Not that I find this tedious", the Sultan went on. "Far from it. But, although I am highly amused, it occurs to me that I would just as soon listen to something else. I'm like that, I am!"

"What do you mean?" the Sultana asked him.

"Isn't it plain?" he answered: "I think I'm very clear. When I say that I'm like that, I mean that I think one pleasure doesn't always prevent a man wanting another. I will explain myself better still."

"A great many things lose in the explanation", the Sultana broke in. "We understand you. Can you want anything else?"

"Yes", the Sultan said; "I want Amanzei to polish off his tale."

"To do that he must go on with it", the Sultana stated.

"On the contrary", Shah Baham retorted. "It seems to me that if he left off now he would finish it much sooner; but, as I am complaisance itself, I allow him to go on, on condition, however, that this does not commit me to anything."

"And besides", Zuleika pursued, "I shall be obliged if you will talk to me no more of Mazulim."

"Very willingly", he answered. "It was this worn-out heart of which you spoke that drew us into a conversation, an idle one to boot, and one which I would blame myself for, since it has vexed you, if I did not remember that my affection for you, and my

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wishfulness to know why you thought I loved you more than Mazulim, was the only thing that brought it about. The more I value your feelings for me, the less I think you ought to blame me for a curiosity I feel only because I love you.' ”

“ ‘Yet’, she answered sadly, ‘it seems to me that for the last few minutes you have not loved me as much as you did: I do not know why I think it, but I do, and the notion hurts me.’

“ ‘I am enchanted to find it does so’, Nasses replied. ‘That sort of uneasiness, which is none the less acute because it is baseless, can only be felt by a heart as tender as it is delicate; you do me an injustice, but that very injustice proves to me how much you love me, and makes you all the dearer to me. Re-assure yourself, my charming Zuleika’, he pursued. ‘Heavens! how delicious it is to banish your fears! Zuleika! Sweet Zuleika! Ah! for your happiness and mine, may these fears never return!’

“As he said this he took Zuleika in his arms and covered her with the tenderest caresses.

“ ‘What raptures you give me!’ she cried. ‘I feel yours enter my heart: they fill it, disturb it, seek out all its corners. Ah, Nasses! What a pleasure it is for me to feel such sweet ones! I have never felt like this before. You only! Yes, you only . . .! But, Nasses! Unkind! Unkind!’

“Although Zuleika did not stop talking, it was impossible for me to hear what she said.”

“I suppose because she spoke too softly?” the Sultan suggested.

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"Most likely", Amanzei answered.

"In any case", the Sultan went on, "you certainly did not lose much by not hearing her, for, if I am not much mistaken, there was not much sense in what she said—at least as far as I am concerned I haven't understood a word."

"I am of your opinion, Sire", Amanzei agreed. "Nothing could have been less lucid. However, either Nasses understood her, or he had not at that moment any more sense than she had, for he said nearly the same things."

"Didn't I tell you so?" the Sultan chimed in. "Those folk had no sense at all."

"When Nasses and Zuleika were become more reasonable", Amanzei continued, "Zuleika said to him with the tenderest glances:

"'How delightful you are, Nasses: ah! why did I not love you sooner!'

"'You have less to complain of than I', he answered: 'I, I say, whom every minute teaches that I have only begun to live since you have loved me. When I consider from what beauties Mazulim has debarred himself, how I pity him! In this very spot which your kindness to me makes as dear as your kindnesses to him at the same spot at first made hateful to me, how Zuleika, how can the ungrateful man not have blushed to have loved others, nor renounced his inconstancy for ever! What djinn, what god even, was watching over my welfare, who, after having made him insensible of so many charms, inspired him with the notion of choosing me to tell you

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of his perfidy? Ah! Zuleika, how miserable I should have been if he had been faithful to you, or if someone else . . .’

“‘Enough!’ Zuleika checked him majestically. ‘If he had been faithful to me I should never have loved another, but it needed none less than Nasses to oust him from my heart.’

“‘Since you have chosen me’, he replied, ‘I believe I am indeed the only man who could have pleased you; but when I think of the position you were in here, of what some giddy rascal Mazulim might have sent here could have demanded of you, of what price he might perhaps have put upon his silence, I cannot help shuddering.’

“‘I do not quite see why’, she answered. ‘Since I should not have wished to gratify him, it would have been all one to me what he asked.’

“‘You cannot answer for yourself’, he said. ‘Some situations are dreadful for a woman, and the one I found you in was perhaps one of the most dreadful . . .’

“‘As dreadful as you care to make it’, she interrupted him; ‘but I beg you to believe that it is less bitter for a woman of feeling to be abandoned by a man who loves her than to give herself to someone she does not love.’

“‘That is beyond doubt’, he answered: ‘it is a terrible thing to be caught in a little retreat. I do not know what I should do if I were a woman, and that happened to me; but it seems to me that I should be very glad for the man who discovered me there to say nothing about it.’

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“ ‘ You would be very glad ’, she caught him up; ‘ apparently you think that a very natural thing to say; and I also should have been very glad for the man who discovered me here to say nothing about it. What a suggestion! You must be going out of your wits to say such things. Do you think that a gentleman needs to be bribed to silence in the way you seem to imagine; and, moreover, do you think certain proposals are made to women of quality? ’

“ ‘ Yes, certainly ’, he answered. ‘ Every woman discovered in a little retreat betrays her susceptibility; from that terrible deductions are drawn, and as a rule the more agreeable a woman is, the less generous a man is.’

“ ‘ Oh, that is a fairy tale ’, Zuleika retorted. ‘ Only attraction, I say only the strongest attraction, can excuse a woman’s giving herself; and I do not believe, whatever people may say about it, that a single one of them would buy so dear as you think the discretion she would stand in need of; and honour . . . ’

“ ‘ Right! ’ he interrupted. ‘ Do you think a woman ever hesitates to sacrifice her honour to her reputation? ’

“ ‘ In any case ’, she replied, ‘ I would not, and I do not know of any situation, however horrible, in which I should be induced to grant a man what my heart persisted in refusing him.’

“ ‘ One must be very nice ’, he went on, ‘ to argue as far as that and go no further: short of winning her heart, one always tries to commit a woman, so that the best thing she can do is to give one her heart;

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and often she is only too happy to be able to do so in the end.'

" 'I begin to see your meaning, sir', she said to him. 'You are trying to make me feel that you think you owe me only to the situation in which you found me here, and you would rather deprive yourself of any charm than not think ill of me. There', she added in tears, 'is the happiness I was congratulating myself upon. Ah, Nasses! was I to expect such cruel treatment from you?'

" 'But, Zuleika', he protested, 'do you think I have forgotten the resistance you offered me, and the pains it cost me to win my happiness from you?'

" 'And do you think', she answered sobbing, 'that I do not understand that you are blaming me for not resisting longer still? Alas! Drawn by my inclination for you, even more than by that you showed for me, I yielded without dreading that some day you would make a crime of my not having held out long enough.'

" 'What foolishness have you got in your head now, Zuleika?' he asked, drawing closer to her. 'That I, I am upbraiding you for having made me happy? Can you think that? For I adore you', he added, forgetful of nothing which might convince her that he was telling the truth.

" 'Let me be!' she said, repulsing him feebly; 'let me be! If you can, forget how much I have loved you!'

" Zuleika's resistance was so gentle that, even if Nasses's advances had been less vigorous, they would have prevailed.

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“ ‘ You? Give over loving me? ’ he said tenderly to her, reinforcing his remarks with everything that could make them more persuasive. ‘ You, who are to make me eternally happy! No, your heart has no hatred for me in it, while mine has nothing but the tenderest feelings for you. ’

“ ‘ No ’, Zuleika answered in a voice which began to be unable to express anger, ‘ no, traitor! You will deceive me no more. Heavens! ’ she added yet more softly, ‘ are you not the most unjust and cruel of men? Ah! Let me be . . . No! you shall not persuade me . . . I must not forgive you . . . How I hate you! ’

“ In spite of all these protestations of hatred Zuleika heaped upon Nasses, he would not believe for a moment that he could be hated; and, indeed, Zuleika did not seem particularly eager for him to believe it.

“ ‘ I do not know if I am too vain ’, he said to her at last, ‘ but I would almost swear that you hate me less than you say you do. ’

“ ‘ You are welcome to that vanity ’, she answered, shrugging her shoulders. ‘ Do you suppose I hate you the less for it? Is it my fault that . . . But it is true, I hate you tremendously. Do not laugh ’, she added; ‘ nothing can be more definite. ’

“ ‘ I have too high an opinion of you to believe it ’, he replied. ‘ So much so that I might catch you in inconstancy and still not believe it. I am, and will be, convinced that you love me as much as you can love anything. ’

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“ ‘In that case’, she retorted, ‘I love you as much as it is possible to love: I am not one for mild emotions.’

“ ‘That I believe’, he answered. ‘And that is what I wished to convey. The more refined one is, the more passionate one is; and, now I come to think of it, a woman of your turn of mind is very unfortunate. In all truth, I dare to say it; we are so depraved nowadays that the more estimable a woman is, the more she is laughed at. I do not say that it is women alone who do her this wrong—that would be understandable enough; but, and you can hardly conceive it, men do so also! Men, who are always demanding fine feelings!’

“ ‘That is only too true’, she agreed.

“ ‘I see it in society’, he continued. ‘What do we look for there? Love? No, certainly not! We want to gratify our vanity, to have our names on everybody’s lips, to go from woman to woman. So as not to miss one, we rush after the most despicable victories, more proud of having won so many women than of possessing one worthy of pleasing; to pursue them all the time, and never to love them.’

“ ‘Ah, how right you are!’ she cried. ‘But it is also the women’s fault. You would despise them less if they all had a certain standard, if they all had feelings which call for respect.’

“ ‘I admit it with regret’, he declared. ‘But one certainly cannot deny that feelings have depreciated a little.’

“ ‘A little!’ she said in astonishment. ‘Ah! say

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a great deal. Of course there are still some right-thinking women, but they are not in the majority. I am not speaking of those who love, for I believe that even you consider them more to be pitied than blamed; but for one whom love alone guides, how many are there not who, far from being able to make that an excuse, do all they can to prevent themselves being ever suspected of it!

“ ‘There are’, he took up, ‘very few women fair-minded enough to speak as you do.’

“ ‘What is the good of trying to conceal such notorious things?’ she asked. ‘I tell you, for my part, that just as much as I wish right-thinking women to be considerately treated, so much would I like contemptible, disreputable women to be overwhelmed with scorn. Every weakness has its excuse; but, really, vice cannot be too roughly reviled.’

“ ‘It is reviled’, he said; ‘but it is tolerated. Vice only wears its true colours in the eyes of those not fashioned to arouse desires, and perhaps the greatest attraction in women to-day is that indecent air which proclaims that they are easily to be won.’

“ ‘I am aware’, she replied, ‘that those are the ones you seek out most: it is never the heart you ask for. Since you do not love, you do not care about being loved; and, provided that you have your way with the person, any other kind of conquest seems useless to you.’ ”

“ ‘One moment, Amanzei’, the Sultan said. ‘When exactly does he despise her?’ ”

“ ‘What a superb question!’ the Sultana cried.

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“What I say is not from disagreeableness”, the Sultan answered. “A question is simply a question; and, as far as I can see, there was nothing wrong in asking you that one. I am given to the spleen, and I am taken to task for saying so. There’s a nice thing now! Yes, instead of a story, I am fobbed off with a conversation where there is nothing to laugh at except when they stop speaking, and then I am told that I am in the wrong! A word to the wise is as good as a thousand, Amanzei, and if Nassès does not get done with despising Zuleika to-morrow . . . I say no more; but it’s me you’ll have to deal with.”

CHAPTER XVII

WHICH WILL TEACH NOVITIATE LADIES, IF SUCH THERE
BE, HOW TO EVADE EMBARRASSING QUESTIONS

"Your Majesty", Amanzei said the next day, "no doubt remembers . . ."

"Yes", the Sultan interrupted rudely, "I remember that yesterday I nearly died of tedium: is that what you mean?"

"If the story wearies you", the Sultana remarked, "it has only to be stopped."

"Not at all, if you please!" the Sultan answered. "I want it to go on without wearying me—if possible, of course, for I don't ask for impossibilities."

Amanzei took up the thread thus:

"'I fear that you, for instance', Zuleika went on, 'have very little delicacy.'

"'There you wrong me', he replied calmly; 'I am by nature very prone to love. Nevertheless, I confess that I have had more women than I have loved.'

"'But that is disgraceful!' she answered; 'I cannot conceive how you can boast of it!'

"'I am not boasting', he denied; 'I am merely stating a fact.'

"'I believe you have deceived many women', she said.

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“ ‘ I have left some, and deceived none ’, he replied. ‘ They had not implored me to be faithful, and so I did not promise them I would be; and you must admit that, if people agree without making conditions, neither can accuse the other of breaking them.’ ”

“ ‘ I am eaten up with curiosity to hear all your adventures ’, Zuleika said.

“ ‘ Do you want a very detailed story of my life? ’ Nasses asked. ‘ It would be long, and I fear you would find it very tedious. However, I can obey you without taking that risk, by suppressing a few trifles. I have been ten years in society, I am twenty-five, and you are the thirty-third beauty with whom I have had a regular affair.’ ”

“ ‘ Thirty-three! ’ she cried.

“ ‘ Yes, on my honour, only thirty-three ’, he answered. ‘ But that is nothing to be surprised at: I have never been the fashion.’ ”

“ ‘ Ah, Nasses! ’ she said, ‘ how much I am to be pitied for loving you! And how little I shall be able to depend upon your constancy! ’ ”

“ ‘ I do not see why ’, he replied. ‘ Do you think that my having had thirty-three women will make me love you the less? ’ ”

“ ‘ Yes ’, she maintained; ‘ the less you had loved, the more you would have had left to love me with, and, in fact, your emotions would not be so absolutely blunted.’ ”

“ ‘ I believe ’, he answered, ‘ that I have proved to you that my heart is not worn out: besides, to tell you frankly, there are very few affairs where the

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emotions come into play at all. Opportunity, politeness, idleness causes nearly all of them. People say, without feeling it, that they like each other; they unconsciously become involved; they see that it is no good hoping for love to arise, and they part through fear of becoming tiresome to one another. It also sometimes happens that one is mistaken as to one's feelings; one thought it was passion, and finds it was mere inclination, an emotion, that is, which does not last long, and which wears itself out in pleasure: whereas love seems to increase by it. All that, as you see, makes it come about that, though one may have had several affairs, one may never have been in love.'

" 'So you have never been in love?' she enquired.

" 'Pardon me', he replied; 'I have twice been madly in love, and I feel, from the way I am beginning with you, that if since that time my heart has not been moved, it was not, as I thought, because I was never to love again, but that I had not yet met the person who could once more give it more than it had lost. But, since you have asked me, might I be allowed to ask in my turn, how often you have been set a-burning?'

" 'Yes', she assented. 'And I would allow you all the more willingly if I had not already told you: you must know that you and Mazulim are the only people who have stirred me.'

" 'If we were less intimate', he said, 'it would be quite natural for you to say such things. I have not even objected, though it was quite impossible to hide Mazulim from me, to your having tried to do so;

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but now that confidence ought to be established, and that I have hidden nothing from you, I confess it would seem strange if you were not to make me the repository of your secrets.'

" 'You would certainly be such', she answered, 'if I had kept any back, but I vow I have nothing to reproach myself with on that score; and even that it seems amazing to me, seeing how short a time I have loved you, that I should have such great confidence in you, in fact that I should be as sure of you as I am of myself.'

" 'I am charmed to hear it, Madam', he replied, in a nettled tone. 'Nevertheless, I am bold enough to say that, considering the way I gave myself into your hands, I had a right to expect better of you.'

" As he said this he made as if to separate from her, but she held him back and asked tenderly:

" 'What is this fancy of yours, Nasses? How can it be that a moment ago you upbraided yourself for doubting what I said, and that now, as it seems, you would blame yourself for believing me?'

" 'If I must tell you, Madam', he said, 'just now I did not believe you; but, being then engaged in something more important to me, I thought it better worth while to work you to persuasion than to enter into details which could, at that moment, only have displeased you, and which, indeed, I had no right to exact from you.'

" 'But, Nasses', she insisted, 'I swear that I have nothing to tell you beyond what I have told you.'

" 'Impossible, Madam!' he interrupted bluntly.

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‘ It is unbelievable that during the fifteen years you have been in society nobody should have made advances to you, and that you should not have succumbed, at least once or twice. You would be the first who, in such a long time, would have had only two lovers, or else you will be forced to agree that the taste for dalliance came upon you very late in life.’

“ ‘ That would not be so new as to be unbelievable, sir ’, she answered. ‘ And I am very much mistaken if many others besides myself have not long remained cold from not having early in their career met the man who was destined to make them feel. I have, I assure you, nothing to tell you; but, even if I had anything of that sort to confide to you, the fear of losing you would still prevent me from doing so. In my experience, contempt has always resulted from such confidences; and, although having previously loved does not make us guilty towards the man who engrosses us, it is, nevertheless, very rarely that his vanity forgives us for his not having been the first man to arouse feelings in us.’

“ ‘ What an idea! ’ he said. ‘ That I of all people would despise you because you were to give me, by confessing all you have done, renewed proofs of your affection, and perhaps the most convincing of all, seeing how difficult it usually is to get it! Well now! you have loved Mazulim: did that shock me? Why should a few more lovers be disagreeable to me? Have I any bone to pick with my predecessors? Is it your fault if Fate did not place me before your eyes the first of all of them? No, Zuleika, no! I am not

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even of those who think that a woman who has loved often is incapable of loving again. Far from thinking that the heart exhausts itself in loving, I am, on the contrary, convinced that the oftener one loves, the more ready one is to feel deeply, and the more delicacy one develops.'

" 'According to that principle, then ', she answered, 'you would not be flattered at being a woman's first lover?'

" 'I am bold enough to say no ', he replied. 'And this is my basis for holding an opinion which may seem absurd to you. At that tender age when a woman has not yet loved, if she wishes to be conquered, it is less that she is urged by her feelings than that she wishes to have them: in short, she would rather please than love. She is dazzled rather than moved. How can you believe her when she says she loves? Has she anything with which to compare the nature and strength of her feelings? In a heart where the newness of the most feeble emotions makes them important, the most trivial sentiment appears to be passion, and a mere desire to be rapture: in short, it is not at a stage where one is so ignorant of love that one can flatter oneself that one feels it, or ought to be convinced that one does.'

" 'Perhaps one does exaggerate one's emotions ', Zuleika agreed; 'but at least one only says what one thinks one feels; and is the lover any the less happy whether the disorder arises from the heart or from the imagination? No, Nasses, whatever may be the disadvantages of which you complain in early feelings,

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I would love you, if possible a thousand times more than I do, if I were the first to whom you made your vows.'

" 'You would be more of a loser than you think for', he pursued. 'I am at the present moment a thousand times better able to recognize your value than I should have been at the period when you would have liked me to love you. At that time I appreciated nothing of mind, delicacy, or true feeling. Always tempted, never in love, my heart was never stirred, even at those moments when, carried away by my transports, I was no longer my own master. Nevertheless, I was believed to be in love, and I believed it myself. They congratulated themselves on being able to make me feel so much, and on my side I was delighted of being capable of such delicate voluptuousness; it seemed to me that no one else in the world was lucky enough to be able to feel the charms of love so keenly as I did. Ceaselessly at the feet of the person I loved, sometimes languid, never cloddish, I found in my soul a hundred possibilities I was astonished to be able to use to such little purpose. A single glance would make my being tremble and catch fire, and since my imagination always out-distanced my pleasure . . . '

" 'Ah, Nasses, Nasses!' she cried rapturously, 'how delicious you must have been! No, you no longer love as you did then.'

" 'A thousand times more', he replied. 'At the time of which I am telling you, I did not love at all. Carried away by the fire of my youth, it was to that,

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and not to my heart, that I owed all those feelings I believed to be love, and since then I have come thoroughly to know . . .’

“ ‘Ah!’ she interrupted, ‘but you must have lost much by being disillusioned. Jealousy, suspicion, a thousand monsters which then you would have been ashamed to think of, poison your pleasures now. Knowing more, you have loved less, and so have been less happy. Your mind has been enlightened at the cost of your heart; now you argue better about love, but you no longer love so well.’

“ ‘That argument’, he went on, ‘would tell as heavily against you as against me, and I must believe, granting always that Mazulim was your first lover, that you cannot love me as much as you loved him.’

“ ‘I am not at all surprised at your making that point’, she answered; ‘you only like to pursue arguments in which I am bound to figure badly; but let us drop the subject.’

“ ‘Drop the subject!’ he said. ‘By no means.’

“ ‘In any case’, she continued sourly, ‘seeing how you have lived, it is not at all surprising that you should think ill of women.’

“ ‘And supposing’, he interrupted, ‘it was because of how women behave that I do not think well of them? You will say that that is impossible.’

“ ‘I assure you not’, she said disdainfully; ‘I would not take the trouble.’

“ ‘Ah, I understand!’ he retorted. ‘You are afraid it would be useless. You absolutely refuse to tell me that you have loved before?’

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“‘What!’ she cried; ‘are you still harping on that string? If you loved me, could you doubt what I tell you?’

“‘Truly, Zuleika’, he declared, ‘believe me or not as you like, but this is becoming monstrous ridiculous.’”

“Zuleika, as your Majesty will have observed”, Amanzei said, “had for a long time been trying to turn the conversation . . .”

“She was quite right to”, the Sultan interrupted. “And as for you, you would have done much better to shorten it a little, and to spare me all those dissertations which you have dragged in without any earthly excuse. Admit that you are nothing but a babbler and do it from sheer itch of telling! How can one take the least interest in these liars? I tell you straight, without beating about the bush, get on with your story!”

“Zuleika”, Amanzei went on, “for a long time clumsily parried Nasses’s questions. At last she apparently surrendered, and, after making him give his word that he would not think the less of her, said:

“‘I ought all the more to forbid myself to satisfy your curiosity seeing how long I have held out. Perhaps you grudge at my refusing you so long will outweigh your gratitude at receiving the confession you are at last wresting from me. You must know that it is easier to arouse new feelings in a woman than to make her admit to those she has had. I do not know whether it is from innate falsity that some are like that; but, as far as I am concerned, I can

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swear that my reticence was not based on so unworthy a motive. I believe that it is impossible to recall with pleasure a frailty, which, far from presenting itself to your mind with the charms it once had for you, never comes back but hand in hand with the remorse consequent upon it, or the unhappy memory of the bad behaviour of a lover.'

" 'That is perfectly true', Nasses remarked. 'A sensitive woman is much to be pitied.'

"Very good!" the Sultan said. "But for the sake of the pleasure your story gives me, I wish you to postpone until to-morrow the sequel (for I dare not yet say the end) of this preposterous conversation."

CHAPTER XVIII

FULL OF ALLUSIONS VERY DIFFICULT TO TRACE

“ ‘ You must know then ’, Zuleika continued, ‘ that, when I came into society, I did not fail (without being particularly beautiful) to find more lovers than I wished for, being as I then was shockingly ignorant about what is called “ the empery of love ”. When I say lovers, I mean that crowd of idle people who say they are in love more from habit than from feeling, to whom one listens because one must, and who are more successful in making us think that we are attractive than in being so themselves. For a long time they tickled my vanity without touching my heart. Born sensitive, I feared love: I felt that it would be hard to find a heart as tender as mine, and that the greatest misfortune that can befall a woman is to have a passion, however happy she may be in it. Whilst I was cold, these considerations governed me; but at last I found out that they had ruled my heart only because no one had succeeded in reaching it, and that the calm we congratulate ourselves upon is a matter of luck rather than of thought. One moment, one single moment was enough to disturb my heart. To see, to love, even to adore; to experience, at the same time, with extreme violence all the sweetest and bitterest feelings; to be swung up on the most

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extravagant hopes, and to plunge from the height into the most torturing uncertainty—all that was the work of one minute and one look. Astounded, even in a whirl, at a state of soul so new to me; devoured by desires which until then had been unknown to me; feeling the necessity of clearing up the cause, and fearing to do so; sunk in the sweet emotion, that divine temper which had overtaken all my senses, I durst not apply my mind to destroying the feelings which entangled me, and, inexplicable as they were for me, already let me enjoy that happiness for which no name can be found either when one feels it or has ceased to feel it. Loving, I began to live. I tried to struggle against whatever hold the emotion had of me. The claims of duty, the fear of losing my position in society, sighs, tears, remorse, all were useless, or rather all increased the cruel emotion which made me its slave. Ah, Nasses! how immeasurable was my delight when, by the eager yet respectful attentions of the man I adored, I knew that I was loved! What turmoil! What rapture! With what delicacy, with what tact, did he not reveal his love! What anguish it was to hold my own in leash! How lucky you men are, Nasses, to be able to tell the person you love that you love them as soon as you feel the first tremors! Not to have to practise that dissimulation so necessary for us if we are to keep your good opinion, but so agonizing for a tender heart! How often, hearing him sigh beside me, did I not sigh with sorrow at not being able to do so for him! When his eyes gazed tenderly in mine, how clear I found that sweet, languorous

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expression, how plainly at last I read love itself! Ah! at those moments, which took me so far from myself, how had I the strength to elude that dreamy delight which enticed me? At last he spoke. Nasses! you cannot know the pleasure which that charming, tender confession gives. You are only told you are loved after you have begged to be told it, and sometimes begged too long, after having been made to repeat your declaration a thousand times. But to see a bashful lover, an adored lover, who does not guess his good fortune, possessed by affection, by fear, by respect, come to your feet to utter his feelings for you; even to be unable to find words to tell you them; trembling as much from sheer love as from the fear of being refused; to anticipate his words, to mutter them to yourself, to engrave them upon your heart while you answer that you do not believe him, and inwardly to deplore your lie; even to exaggerate to yourself what he says, to add to all the love he shows for you all that you feel for him: Nasses! Believe me, no sight or pleasure you may enjoy can be nearly so sweet as those I am telling you of.'

“‘If vanity alone is enough to make you enjoy the sight you depict to me so vividly’, Nasses answered, ‘I suppose that, when love infuses the heart’s desires, nothing in the world can be more satisfactory to you. But this man you loved so tenderly spoke at last: did you answer?’

“‘Imagine my confusion!’ she replied. ‘Torn between love and virtue, if the latter did not win, it at least enabled me to mask the former, but not so much

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as I wished for. Too long enthralled by his words, my emotion revealed the secret of my heart; and, while I believed that I was answering him coldly, my mouth and my eyes told him a thousand times over that my flame burned as warmly as his.'

" 'That is a misfortune that has happened to others', Nasses remarked callously. 'Well, and who was this dangerous man, whom, in spite of your pride, to see was to love?'

" 'What is his name to you?' she asked. 'Am I not telling you what you want to know?'

" 'Not yet', he averred. 'And you yourself feel that the confession is not complete.'

" 'Well', she replied, 'it was the Rajah Amagi.'

" 'Amagi!' he cried. 'When on earth did you have an affair with him? He is my friend, he hides nothing from me, and I know that since he has been in society he has never been in love with anyone but Canzada. Amagi!' he repeated. 'Are you sure that you are not making some mistake?'

" 'Certainly not!' she cried in her turn. 'What an extraordinary question! Absolutely unheard of!'

" 'Not at all', he pursued. 'You will see that it is quite natural. Amagi has told me that, in spite of his unbounded affection for Canzada and his desire not to fail her, he has sometimes amused himself elsewhere because some women make such unequivocal advances; and men are so fatuous that the contempt they have for women does not prevent their being grateful, at least momentarily, for what they do for them. In telling me of his lapses from Canzada, he

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confessed that he blamed himself for them all the more that, among the women who had sometimes seduced him from her, he had never found one who deserved his good opinion or his friendship, and had not done for him merely from light-headedness what he had sometimes been absurd enough to think due to feelings so strong as to make them forget the proprieties. You cannot surely be among those? In consequence I am bound to believe that he has not had an affair with you.'

" 'Now you know that he does not tell you everything', she answered; 'for he was in love with me for over three years, and most passionately.'

" 'If he did not tell me about it', he retorted, 'it was not because he wanted to make a secret of it; but, apparently, because he simply forgot all about it. Was it you who were unfaithful to him?'

" 'How much longer are you going to ask me such questions?' she demanded.

" 'I beg your pardon for asking it', he replied; 'but you are not at all the sort of person who is jilted, and so it must not surprise you. He threw you over then? And who engaged your attention after him?'

" 'Nobody', she answered with a candid expression. 'Given over for a long time to the sorrow of having lost him, I hoped I could never be susceptible again; but Mazulim came on the scene, and I did not remain true to myself.'

" 'Egad!' he cried, 'women are most unlucky, and hideously exposed to calumny.'

" 'That is only too true', she said; 'but what should bring that into your mind just now?'

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“ ‘Your case’, he replied, ‘to whom, since I must tell you, a few more adventures have been ascribed than I see you can have had.’

“ ‘Oh!’ she answered, ‘that neither vexes nor astonishes me. A woman has only got to be something less than frightful and everybody at once imagines that she is more amenable to love than she ought to be; and it is often the men to whom she has least lent her ear whom the public brackets her the most firmly with. But it does not matter to me whatever they may say. Would it not be possible to get you to speak of something else?’

“ ‘Then it is not true that you have had all the lovers they say you have?’ he persisted.

“ Zuleika replied to this fresh impertinence with a mere shrug of her shoulders.

“ ‘Do not be annoyed with me for saying this’, he pursued. ‘If you were less lovable I should find it easier to believe that you are not condensing your history.’

“ ‘I beg your pardon’, she said acidly; ‘I have been the lover of Tom, Dick, and Harry.’

“ ‘That is exactly what I was told’, he remarked. ‘Your beginnings are not certain, but it is known that in your earliest youth, desiring eagerly to be talented and believing that the best way to become highly so was to be keenly interested in those who were, you did not disdain your masters, which is the reason why you sing so tastefully and dance with so much grace.’

“ ‘Ah, great God! what horrors!’ Zuleika gasped.

“ ‘You are right to cry out about it, Madam’, he

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commented coldly, 'for, in fact, it is horrible. But, for my part, I do not condemn you, and I cannot even honour you enough for having, at an age when women who are some day to be the least reserved have every imaginable prejudice, had the strength of mind to uproot all those which your birth and your education must have implanted in you. When you entered society, convinced that one could not be too hypocritical, you hid your inclination to pleasure under a cold, prudish manner. Born without much feeling, but full of curiosity, all the men you saw pricked this curiosity, and, as far as you could, you probed them all to the bottom. When one has as much wit and insight as you, it is not very difficult to decipher a man, and I have heard say that the man who cost you most pains took you no more than a week to analyse. These philosophic amusements became known: people gave your motives an ill turn: without sacrificing your curiosity, you curbed it. Not for long, however. Your especial occupations not being approved by those who observed them, you thought you would remove yourself from their sight, and, renouncing solitude, you brought into society your natural bent to know everything. At that time the Princess Sahab had Iskander for a lover: you wanted to judge for yourself if her taste was to be trusted, and filched him from her. She has never forgiven you, and even now laments it daily.'

" 'Ah, just Heavens!' Zuleika cried, beside herself with rage, 'can there be more atrocious calumnies than this?'

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“ ‘ I have been assured ’, he went on as coolly as before, ‘ that you soon threw Iskander over to take Akbar Mirza, with whom (since you found him tiresome although he was a prince) you associated the Vizier Attar Mulk and the Emir Nour-ed-Din: that the prince’s conversation with you being entirely about his ailments (which you knew to be even worse than he admitted), the Vizier being too much occupied with State affairs to be as much occupied with your charms as he ought to have been, and his sole entertainment of you being the details of his profound political schemes, while the Emir’s were of his great feats of arms, you were disgusted with three men who were more important than agreeable. People dare add that, knowing how dangerous it is to have enemies when one is at Court, you kept them in ignorance of the rôles you made them play; and that, forced to humour them, you threw yourself with the greatest secrecy into the arms of young Velid, who, less great, less profound, less of a warrior, but more charming than his rivals, was for some time your only compensation for the spleen they gave you. It is also said that, finding Velid cooling in his affection and wishing to revive his flame by giving him some uneasiness, you took Jemla: that Velid, annoyed at seeing a rival and carefully spying upon you, ended by discovering the other three, and that the whole affair, until then so judiciously organized, finished in a scandal most damaging as far as you were concerned, for which you suffered the most bitter and public mortification.’ ”

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“ ‘ Ah, this is too much ! ’ Zuleika interposed rising. ‘ And I am going to . . . ’ ”

“ ‘ One moment more, if you please, Madam ’, Nasses said, holding her back: ‘ people have even been so outrageously impudent as to say that, seeing you were not successful in fixed affairs, hating love but still loving pleasure, you allowed yourself only fleeting amusements, agreeable enough to fill your idle hours but never keen enough to stir your heart. A kind of philosophy, one may mention, which has not failed to take some hold in this century, and whose wisdom and usefulness I could easily demonstrate were this a fitting occasion to do so. ’ ”

“ At the conclusion of this statement Zuleika burst into tears, and Nasses, pretending not to notice, went on thus :

“ ‘ You realize of course that I am far too fair, and know you far too well to believe implicitly everything I have been told about you. ’ ”

“ ‘ You are too tolerant ’, she answered.

“ ‘ No ’, he replied modestly; ‘ the attitude I adopt towards you is perfectly simple, and to test it I have only to appeal to the way you yielded to my desires; but, though I do not believe the whole story, it would be impossible for me not to believe any of it. ’ ”

“ ‘ But why ? ’ she asked. ‘ Everything you have been told is so likely that I cannot conceive why you should have such a misplaced consideration for me. ’ ”

“ ‘ Then ’, he said, ‘ I only believe . . . ’ ”

“ ‘ Ah, believe it all ! ’ she interrupted. ‘ Believe it all, and let us never meet again ! ’ ”

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“ ‘Even if I ought to’, he answered, ‘the effort would be too great for me. Think whether, believing you innocent, I could so burden myself or be so barbarous as to do what you apparently advise me to.’

“ ‘No, no’, she replied, ‘you believe everything you have been told, you believe it, and you are not worth my bothering to disabuse you.’

“ ‘So then we are to quarrel!’ he pursued. ‘The same evening will have seen the birth and death of your flame—for I am not speaking of mine’, he added with a sigh—‘since I fear only too strongly that it will last for ever!’

“ ‘Yes’, Zuleika answered, ‘we are to quarrel, and finally.’

“ ‘Finally!’ he cried. ‘That is to say you will throw me over as readily as you accepted me? That, upon honour, is a thing I did not think possible. But how can this prodigious constancy upon which you so plume yourself, this sensitive soul of yours, lend themselves to such a proceeding? What violence will you not do yourself in keeping your word? How I pity you! For, after all, since you have to change, what can be better for me than your changing so quickly? A longer intercourse with you would have made your breaking with me too painful. Nevertheless, I like to suppose that you will think it over, and that, if it be true that your inclination for me has quite faded away, you will at least be afraid that I might say that, although I was crowned with your most especial favours and that you had every reason for giving me the highest praise, you were not able

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to discipline yourself to constancy for twenty-four hours. I warn you, that after the liberties you have allowed me, the world will not view your behaviour good-naturedly. No', he continued, drawing closer to her, and taking her tenderly in his arms, 'no, you will not be so unkind to the most ardent of lovers.'

"What is this?' she cried, struggling violently in his arms. 'You expect me, no! to give myself to you again?'

"Thereupon she unburdened upon Nasses all the words she could think of to show how very indignant with him she was. He tried in vain to overcome her resistance, for her scorn served her better than that severe chastity of which she had made so out-of-place a display, and he was forced to put forth his most valiant efforts to gain favours so small that he had not even asked her for them hitherto. She was still protecting herself against him, when the sound of an approaching carriage put an end to attack and defence alike.

"No doubt these are my people, sir', she said; 'and I am going away. I shall not urge you to reflect upon what has happened between us, for that would in no wise improve you: the more capable one is of behaving badly, the less one is of realizing it.'

"She got up as she concluded this speech, and was about to go out when something I shall tell your Majesty about to-morrow, compelled her to stay."

"Why to-morrow?" the Sultan asked. "Do you suppose that you wouldn't tell me to-day if I had a fancy to it? Luckily for you I haven't the least curiosity about all this; so to-morrow, or any other day: it's all the same to me."

CHAPTER XIX

AH! SO MUCH THE BETTER!

"AFTER what has happened between Zuleika and Mazulim, she must have little expected to see him again, yet it was he who came in. She drew back in surprise when she saw who it was; and, tears succeeding her astonishment, she let herself sink upon me. He pretended not to notice the state his arrival had thrown her into, and went boldly towards her, saying:

"I have come, Queen of my heart, to beg your pardon. A network of business, troublesome, vexatious, maddening, prevented me from complying with your commands. What is this? You are crying? Oh, Nasses, this is not well done; you have abused my easiness, my friendship, my trust in you! . . . But really, upon my word, I do not understand anything of all this. Are you angry? I am furious that you should be; sorry beyond words; I shall never get over it. This is an unique occurrence, astonishing, most extraordinary! . . . Come, may I not know what it is all about? Tell me, you two! You are as dumb as stones. Ah! I see what it is; I am the innocent cause. You think I am unfaithful, yes you do! How little you know me! I come back to you a thousandfold, I say a thousandfold more tender, more in love, more enchanted than before.'

THE SOFA

“The more Mazulim pretended affection, the more obstinately Zuleika, disconcerted and shattered, held her tongue. Nasses, spitefully enjoying her confusion, was afraid that, if he answered Mazulim, she would seize the opportunity to recover, and impatiently expected her answer. In vain. For some time they all three remained without speaking.

“‘For Heaven’s sake clear up this mystery’, Mazulim at last begged Nasses. ‘Is it of you or of me that her ladyship has to complain? Does she not love me any more? Does she love you?’

“‘By no means’, Nasses answered. ‘Since I must tell you, it is me this unfaithful creature no longer loves; we have had a difference.’

“‘Oh, perfidious lady!’ Mazulim said. ‘After all the oaths you made me to be faithful for ever! . . . How horrible!’

“‘It was only with extreme difficulty that I succeeded in consoling her for the loss of you’, Nasses went on. ‘It is only fair to say that; and to do my duty to the last, I will, at whatever cost to myself, leave you to try if you can console her for the loss of me any more easily. Farewell, Madam’, he proceeded, addressing Zuleika. ‘My happiness did not last long; but I know the kindness of your heart too well to despair of your some day making good to me what your inhibitions make me lose now. In case you should be pleased ever to remember me, be sure that I shall always be at your beck and call.’

“Once Nasses had gone, Zuleika got up abruptly, and tried to go out also.

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“‘No, Madam’, Mazulim said respectfully, ‘I cannot bring myself to let you go without justifying my behaviour; perhaps you also might have some little excuses to offer me, and, however that may be, I should think it improper for us to separate without some little explanation on both sides. Are you never going to say anything? Have you already forgotten that you promised me everlasting faith?’

“‘Ah, sir!’ she answered weeping, ‘do not add to your delinquencies that of speaking to me again of a love you never really felt!’

“‘There now!’ he answered; ‘that is what women are like! One misses an appointment through no fault of one’s own, one groans, wilts, dies of pain, and when one deserves nothing but pity, when one comes back full of the most tender passion to throw oneself at the feet of one’s beloved, one finds oneself held in abhorrence. Still, you would be less unjust only if you were less sensitive. With refined minds, one can never err lightly. Thus I am grateful for your anger, since without it I should never all my life have known how much you loved me, and would therefore have loved you less myself. But tell me though’, he added, going up to her familiarly, ‘are you really very cross?’

“A savagely scornful look was Zuleika’s sole answer to this question.

“‘Because really’, he said, ‘it would be very easy for me to acquit myself. Yes, indeed’, he added, seeing her shrug her shoulders, ‘too easy—I am not exaggerating. For come now, how have I wronged you?’

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“‘Upon my soul!’ she cried, ‘I admire your impudence! to make me come here, and not come yourself! But bad, impertinent, despicable as that behaviour is, it is in keeping with your character and did not astonish me. But to add the vilest trick, to send here a stranger whom you had told of my frailty, when you ought to have kept it hidden from everyone . . .’

“‘Oh, hidden!’ he interrupted; ‘a fine secret that would be, and of marvellous use! Do you imagine that an affair between people like us can ever be kept secret? But, even supposing that, flying in the face of all your experience, you were blind enough to think your name would never appear in it, how, may I ask you, have I exposed you? Is not our secret safer in the hands of a gentleman than in those of a slave? And had I even with me the one who acts for me in these matters, who was waiting for us here? Time was short. I chose, for my messenger the man that among all my friends I knew to be the best behaved, Nasses in fact, who besides being well behaved is intelligent, and deserved more than anyone else to be pleasantly received, and who, I am bold enough to say, ought to be highly considered and well treated. And finally I will take the liberty of saying that I do not quite see why, after the thanks you have so generously put him in a position to give you, you need complain of the man I sent you. Between ourselves, this point might be worth clearing up; however, you will only do this if it pleases you to do so; for, and I hope my saying this will not vex

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you, I am neither so inquisitive nor so difficult as you are.'

" 'What impertinence and fatuity!' Zuleika cried.

" 'Gently please, Madam, in expressions of that kind', Mazulim said severely. 'Whatever I may be, there are a thousand things I could take you to task about also, and I beg you not to force me to work my revenge. If you will do me the honour of taking my advice, we will discuss this in a friendly way: perhaps you will gain as much by it as I shall. Let us see now! First of all, I make no doubt, Nasses's presence annoyed you; and I make as little doubt that to put yourself at your ease with him, you showered upon him all those favours you were so kind as to design for me.'

" 'And if that were the case?' Zuleika answered proudly.

" 'I understand', he declared. 'It was.'

" 'Well then, yes', she maintained bravely: 'I did love him.'

" 'Do not let us misuse words at this point', he answered. 'You did not love him, but it came to the same thing. Admit, now that you know him rather better, that he is a rare good fellow.'

" 'All I know is', she retorted coldly, 'that if he is an insolent and inconsiderate coxcomb, he has at least something to make up for it with, and that there are others who adopt his manner and yet well might, for many reasons, be less presumptuous.'

" 'Obscure as your epigram is', he replied, 'I realize perfectly well that it is aimed at me, and I am

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quite ready, for what it is worth, to allow you the small consolation of hearing me admit it. I will even carry my deference further, and deny myself a refutation which might perhaps outrage politeness.'

" 'What wretched things you say!' she cried, looking at him with pity, 'and how ill this light, bantering tone befits a *thing* like you!'

" 'Say what you will, Madam', he answered, 'I shall neither falter in my respect for you nor swerve from the plan I am determined to follow with you. I shall not be sorry to offer you in myself the pattern of moderation. Perhaps merely seeing me true to my principles will tempt you to imitate me.'

" 'You will exercise this boasted moderation by yourself then', she retorted rising, 'for I am going to . . .'

" 'Not so, Madam, if you please', he said, holding her back; 'you shall not leave me! Not in this manner should people like ourselves conclude; for your honour's sake as for mine, we must lend ourselves to a mutual enlightenment, and avoid a scandal which would be much more dreadful for you than for me. In short, Zuleika, you will hear me out!'

" Whether Zuleika appreciated the damage this adventure might do her if she did not control herself, and that she thought, all things considered, that she ought to omit nothing to make Mazulim mum on the subject; or whether, too despicable to be angry for long at being despised, her anger began to abate, I do not know. In any case she relapsed back on to the sofa, but without looking at Mazulim, who, unmoved by this mark of her scorn, went on thus:

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“ ‘ You admit that you took Nasses: anyone else might tell you that ordinarily a woman enters upon a new affair only when the old one is completely broken off, and thereupon would crush you with all the contempt such behaviour seems to call for. But for myself, being enough a man of the world to understand how it happened, far from bearing you a grudge for it, I love you all the more for it.’

“ ‘ That, however, is not the effect I wanted it to have upon your heart ’, she answered.

“ ‘ You cannot really know ’, he replied. ‘ Could you in your disordered state unravel the threads of your motives? You thought I was fickle, you were urged to take your revenge: if you had loved me less you would not have done so, and Nasses would have tried in vain to take you as far as he did. Believe me, it belongs only to the strongest passions to arouse those emotions which give one’s mind no time for thought or for freedom of action. I am utterly astonished that Nasses should have had so little delicacy as to wish to take advantage of your state, or blind enough not to see that even in his arms you were wholly another’s, and that without your love for me you would never have made him a happy man.’

“ ‘ Not at all ’, she said; ‘ I liked him, and I have, without any doubt, been formally unfaithful to you according to the rules.’

“ ‘ Sheer vanity on your part ’, he retorted. ‘ Do not go and believe that: it is not in the least true.’

“ ‘ What! ’ she demanded, ‘ not in the least true?’

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I find it very peculiar that you should know more about it than I do.'

" 'Yet I know so much about it that I could tell you word for word how he set about seducing you ', he answered. 'Nasses thought you lovely, and preferred telling you of the feelings you aroused in him to making you my excuses, and I would even bet that, far from speaking in my favour, he . . . '

" 'There is not doubt of that ', she interrupted.

" 'Am I not telling you?' he continued. 'What a wretched victory he won, and how inglorious. After all, some people have to be forgiven these little stratagems: without them they could never make themselves agreeable.'

" 'What?' she asked in amazement. 'You dare maintain that you were not being unfaithful to me?'

" 'Of course I was not ', he declared. 'And that is what makes me relish your adventure so highly.'

" 'You were not guilty?' she repeated. 'Then what had become of you?'

" 'I only got away from the Emperor's the moment before I came here, and Zadig himself, who by the way is being tremendously rallied for being lost to view all yesterday, was with me all the time. He will be able to confirm my statement.'

" Zuleika trembled on hearing Zadig named, and reddened as she looked at Mazulim, who, without seeming to notice her agitation, continued thus:

" 'Although I still like you very much, you will realize that we shall no longer live in that intimacy you permitted me. It is not that I do not forgive you

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everything; but a settled relationship is no longer fitting for us; and after all, we took each other from whim rather than from love: we were not joined by affection. What is taking place now need neither mortify you nor displease me, nor prevent us from yielding to a fancy, if, without wishing to come together again, we should at intervals feel attracted towards each other.'

" 'I hope', she answered disdainfully, 'that you feel how absurd this arrangement is even while you suggest it, and that you have no illusions about making me agree to it.'

" 'Pardon me', he replied, 'you are too sensible not to feel that one owes a certain tact and consideration to one's old friends: besides, you must be well aware that it is an established custom nowadays to form as many ties as possible, and to grant everything to one's new acquaintances without, for that reason, lessening one's gifts to the old. I am sure you will approve the arrangement I have had the honour to put before you, and I regard it as absolutely settled between us.'

" Zuleika, though very well adapted to such a shameful traffic, was nevertheless highly offended that Mazulim should think her capable of doing something she did every day, and tried to put on an air of dignity with him, which, since it made her appear only more wretched, made him only the more inclined to treat her without any delicacy whatsoever.

" 'If it were not so late', he told her, 'I would prove to you that, far from having any cause for com-

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plaint against me, you owe me unlimited thanks. I know quite well that Zadig spent yesterday with you, alone with you, and not only the day, but a great part of the night. Curious rather than jealous, and sure that you would break the promise you gave me never to see him again. I had you both watched, and . . .’

“ ‘There was no need for you to take that trouble’, she interrupted. ‘I made no attempt to hide the fact, and the reasons which made me receive Zadig yesterday can only redound to my honour.’

“ ‘Aha!’ he said, as though surprised; ‘this is something very subtle!’

“ ‘Your mockery does not prevent its being the truth’, she answered: ‘I had not yet finally broken with him, and it was to tell him that I would never see him again that I . . .’

“ ‘Spent the whole day and the whole night with him’, he broke in. ‘I do not dispute your motive, extraordinary as it is. You will not deny that it is unusual for a woman to shut herself up with a man for twenty-four hours merely to break with him. But a thing being unexampled may for all that be very reasonable, and I, who am striving only to make a case for you, suppose that Zadig, receiving his unhappy dismissal from you, almost died of despair at your feet; and that, moved by the slough of despond into which your unfaithfulness had cast him, you consoled him with the whole wealth of your humanity, without your care for him at all affecting the faith you swore to me. A desperate man is most unreasonable;

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one can hardly bring him to act with any common sense; and one has to tell him the same thing over and over again in different ways, submit to lamentations, reproaches, tears, rage: it all takes a very long time. At all events, I may tell you that you have no cause to repent of the time you spent in trying to soothe Zadig: to-day he was charmingly gay. Zadig gay! Can you imagine it? If, and I shall take care not to doubt it, your story is true, either your arguments made a great impression upon him, or, to bear his regret so easily, he must have loved you very mildly. If the one does honour to your mind, the other does little enough to your charms; but I have no desire to wound you—you will know which it is. In any case, you ought to have advised him to look sad, at least for so long as you wished to deceive me.'

"Here Zuleika wanted to make some plea, but Mazulim interposing said:

" 'Anything you might say to me, Madam, would be useless. Spare me excuses, which I neither ask for nor wish to receive, and which would give you trouble without satisfying me. Farewell', he added rising. 'It is getting late, and we ought to have separated long ago. Oh, by the way, what are you going to do about Nasses?'

"This question appeared to astound Zuleika.

" 'Surely my question is a sensible one', he went on. 'You parted on bad terms, and I think that was imprudent of you. You would do well to see him again. Take my advice—avoid a scandal. It cannot be more difficult for you to keep him in hatred than

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it was to take him without love. If you insist upon not seeing him, he will probably blab, and, though what you did was the most natural thing, there are sure to be some low-minded people unscrupulous enough to put you in a false position, and to turn this simple story into a most fantastic and ridiculous one. Not, of course, that what people may say can upset you at all; when one has a certain reputation one affair more or less calls for no particular notice; but one should avoid making enemies. I will formally introduce him to you to-morrow.'

" 'What?' she cried; 'am I to see you again?'

" 'Why, of course', he answered, offering her his hand to lead her out: 'you must submit to that. If by any chance Zadig should be so absurd as to object, you may rely upon me: either he will be forced to give you up, or else, in the end, he will become used to seeing us pay you our warmest attentions.'

" Having said this he again offered her his hand, and, seeing that she persisted in refusing it, said, taking it by force:

" 'How paltry! Your childishness is unbearable.'

" Then they went out."

" They went out!" the Sultan cried: "ah! what a relief! In my opinion, that's the best part of your story. And they didn't come back again?"

" I never saw Zuleika again", Amanzei replied; "but I saw Mazulim for some time."

" And was he always", the Sultan said, "You know . . . Gad! he was an odd customer! And whom did he have after Zuleika?"

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"Many women worth about as much as she was, and some who deserved better than to get him, and whom I pitied."

"But now I think of it", Shah Baham asked the Sultana, "didn't you think Mazulim treated Zuleika very badly?"

"I find her so contemptible", the Sultana answered, "that I wish he had punished her more severely still, if possible."

"It seemed to me", the Sultan declared, "that she was too meek with him: it was not natural."

"And I think the contrary", the Sultana said. "A woman like Zuleika has nothing to meet contempt with, since the ignominy of her behaviour exposes her to the cruellest insults, which the foulness of her character, and the inward shame, which in spite of herself weighs upon her, leave her no strength to parry. Besides, even if Amanzei had a little exaggerated Zuleika's humiliation, far from upbraiding him with it, I should be grateful to him. To paint vice as happy and triumphant would be in some measure to recommend it."

"Yes, yes, of course", the Sultan said; "all that is very necessary. But let us quit that point: such a discussion sours me, and I shall no doubt lose my temper if we go on with it. Where did you go after you left Mazulim, Amanzei?"

CHAPTER XX

SOULFUL DELIGHTS

“THOUGH I got much amusement from being in Mazulim’s little retreat, the interests of my soul forced me to tear myself away; and convinced that there, at any rate, I should never find my release, I set myself to look for a house in which I should, if possible, have more luck than in any of those I had so far dwelt in. After several journeyings, during which I saw only things which I had already seen, or which are hardly worth telling your Majesty, I went into an enormous palace which belonged to one of the greatest lords in Agra. I wandered about in it for some time, and at last made my lair in a closet, both lavishly and very tastefully decorated, though the two things hardly seem compatible. Everything there breathed the softer joys: the ornaments, the furniture, the smell of the exquisite perfumes which were always kept burning—everything brought them to the eye, everything conveyed them to the soul. In fact, this closet might have been taken for the temple of voluptuousness, the true abode of pleasures.

“No sooner had I settled myself there than the goddess to whom I was to belong came in. She was the daughter of the omrah in whose house I was. In her face dwelt youth, and grace, and beauty, and that

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indefinable something which alone can give them value: she was the embodiment of attractive charm. My soul could not look upon her and remain calm: the sight of her gave birth to a thousand delicious sensations I thought beyond its scope. Destined sometimes to uphold so lovely a creature, not only did I cease to grieve over my fate, but I feared to be compelled to enter upon a new existence.

“ ‘ Ah, Brahma ! ’ I murmured, ‘ what can be the state of felicity you reserve for those who have been your good servants, if those whose soul has deserved your righteous anger are allowed joyfully to behold such marvellous beauties ? Come ! ’ I pursued enraptured, ‘ come charming image of the goddess, come to soothe an unquiet soul, which would instantly mingle with yours if cruel commands did not hold it fast in its prison ! ’

“ And it seemed as though at that moment Brahma was giving ear to my prayer. The sun was then at its height, and the heat was tremendous: Zeinida soon got ready to enjoy the sweets of slumber; and, herself drawing the curtains, left the room in that half-light, so conducive to sleep and to delight, which in no way diminishes the effect of glances but adds to their passion; which emboldens bashfulness, and allows it to yield itself more freely to love.

“ A simple shift of gauze, and almost entirely open at that, was soon Zeinida’s only garb. She cast herself carelessly upon me. Gods ! with what rapture I received her ! And as Brahma, in confining my soul to a sofa had given it the choice of being in

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whatever part it wished, with what pleasure did I not at once take advantage of this liberty!

“ I carefully chose the spot whence I could best feast my eyes upon Zeinida’s charms, and set myself to contemplate them with the ardour of the most tender lover, and the admiration which the coldest man could not have refused them. Gods! what beauties offered themselves to my gaze! At last slumber came to close those eyes which filled me with so much love.

“ I then occupied myself in going over all the charms I had still to examine, and in returning to those I had already feasted my eyes upon. Although Zeinida slept quietly enough, she every now and again turned over, and each movement she made, in altering the lie of her shift, revealed new beauties to my hungry eyes. Such attractions finally conquered my soul. Prostrated by the number and the violence of its desires, all its faculties remained for some time in abeyance. I vainly strove to gather my wits. I could only feel that I loved, and, without foreseeing or fearing the consequences of such a fatal passion, I gave myself over to it wholly.

“ ‘ Delicious creature!’ I cried at last; ‘ no, no, you cannot be a mortal. It is not their lot to have so many charms. Even higher than aerial beings, there is not one of them you do not eclipse. Ah! vouchsafe to accept the homage of a soul which adores you! Refrain from preferring some vile mortal to him! Zeinida, divine Zeinida! No, no one is worthy of you; no, Zeinida, since not one of them can equal you in glory!’

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“ Whilst I was so ardently engaged with Zeinida, she became restless, and turned over. The position she now assumed was favourable to me, and in spite of my discomposure, I had enough of my wits left to take advantage of it. Zeinida was lying on her side, her head just above the sofa padding, which her lips almost touched. Thus I could, in spite of Brahma’s strict commands, something gratify my violent desires: my soul transferred itself to the padding, and so close to Zeinida’s mouth that at length it succeeded in adhering wholly to it.

“ The soul, I am convinced, experiences delights which the term *pleasure* does not express, and for which even the word *rapture* is inadequate.’ This sweet, impulsive intoxication into which my soul swooned, and which occupied all its faculties so deliciously, defies description.

“ No doubt a soul, hampered by its bodily organs, forced to measure its transports by their weakness, cannot, when imprisoned in a body, give itself over to them so strongly as when it is rid of it. Sometimes we even feel it, during a keen pang of pleasure, trying to force the barriers of the body, diffusing itself throughout its prison, filling the whole with its devouring fire and stress, vainly seeking for outlet, till at last, spent by its efforts, it sinks into that lethargy which seems for a time to blot it out. That, it seems to me, is the cause of the exhaustion excessive delight brings upon us.

“ Such is our fate that our soul, fretting even in the midst of the greatest pleasures, is ever bound to seek

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more than it can find. My soul, clinging to Zeinida's mouth, drowned in its own felicity, sought to win a still greater one. It tried, but in vain, to glide entirely into Zeinida; but, held back in its prison by Brahma's cruel commands, not all its struggles could set it free. Its violent efforts, its ardour, its furious desires, apparently warmed Zeinida's. No sooner did my soul perceive the effect it was having upon hers, than it redoubled its attempts. It fluttered more rapidly over Zeinida's lips, dashed over them with greater speed, clung to them with hotter fire. The disorder which began to suffuse Zeinida's soul increased the pain and the pleasure of mine. Zeinida sighed: I sighed: her lips formed some broken words, and a ravishing pink o'erspread her cheeks. At last the most seductive dream put her faculties to rout. The sweetest emotions came to disturb the calm upon which she floated.

“ ‘Yes! you love me!’ she cried tenderly. These words were followed by a few more, hindered by the most heartfelt sighs.

“ ‘Do you doubt my love for you?’ she continued.

“ Still less free than Zeinida, I listened to her with rapture, and had not the power to respond. Soon her soul, as much disturbed as mine, yielded itself altogether to its consuming fires, and a sweet shudder . . . Heavens! how lovely Zeinida became!

“ My delight and hers vanished with her awakening. Of that darling illusion which had enthralled her senses nothing remained but a soft languor which made her seem only the more worthy of the pleasures

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she had just experienced. Her looks, wherein love itself ruled, were still compact of the fire which coursed through her veins. When she was able to open her eyes they had already lost the look of dreamy rapture which my love and the turmoil of her senses had impregnated them with, but they were still entrancing! What mortal, knowing himself to be the cause of their splendour, would not have died in the excess of his yearning and his bliss?

“ ‘Zeinida!’ I cried in ecstasy, ‘beloved Zeinida! It is I who have just made you happy; it is to the union of your soul with mine that your delights are due. Ah! may it be always so, and may you respond to my ardour alone! No, Zeinida, the world does not contain a tenderer and more faithful heart than mine! Ah! if it could escape the toils of Brahma, or if he could forget it, bound to yours for ever it would be by you alone that its immortality could be a joy for it, and that it would hope to perpetuate its being. Oh! if I were ever to lose you, soul that I adore! Oh, how in the vastness of the universe, or shackled by the cruel bonds with which Brahma might load me, how could I ever find you again? Ah, Brahma! if your supreme power ravishes me from Zeinida, at least, however bitter the pain of it, let me never lose the memory of her.’

“While my soul was so tenderly adoring Zeinida, this charming girl seemed given over to the sweetest reverie, and I began to be alarmed at the tranquillity the dream had induced in her, and upon which I had previously congratulated myself.

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“ ‘Zeinida’, I told myself, ‘is no doubt used to the delights she has just tasted. Whatever grip they may have had of her senses, they have not startled her thoughts: she is in a muse, but she does not seem to be inquiring as to the cause of the feelings which possessed her. Familiar with the sweetest and tenderest raptures love can give, I have done no more than recall them to her. A luckier mortal has already developed in her heart that germ of love nature embedded there. It was his image, not my flame, that made her burn; she seemed in the midst of her tumult to be engaged in reassuring a lover, who is perhaps in the habit of pouring out his fears and his troubles within her arms. Ah, Zeinida! if it be true that you love, my lot, in the position Brahma’s anger has placed me in, is going to be terrible!’

“My soul was wandering in the maze of these notions when I heard someone knock softly at the door. Zeinida’s blushes at this unexpected noise increased my fears. She hastily adjusted the disorder into which the restlessness of her sleep had thrown her dress, and, more presentable, bade the person come in.

“ ‘Ah!’ I said to myself, stricken with a piercing grief, ‘perhaps I shall see a rival: if he is a happy one, what tortures for me! If he becomes so, and Zeinida is what I sometimes think her to be, and it is to her I am to owe my deliverance, what a terrible blow it will be to me to have to leave her after she has inspired such feelings in me!’

“Although with my knowledge of the morals of

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Agra I should have been protected against this fear of leaving Zeinida, and knowing that it was likely enough that at fifteen years old or thereabouts as she appeared to be, she would not have all that Brahma required to deliver me back into human life, it was also possible that I might have everything to fear on that score; and, however painful it might be for me to witness her kindness to my rival, I preferred that torment to the one of losing her.

“At Zeinida’s summons a young Indian, with the most radiant face, came into the room. The more worthy to please he seemed to me, the more my hatred against him was aroused; it was multiplied by the way in which Zeinida greeted him. Confusion, love, and fear were by turns depicted upon her face, and she gazed at him for some time before she spoke. He seemed to be as agitated as she was, but from his timid and respectful manner I guessed that, even if he were loved, he was not yet lucky. But in spite of his shyness and his extreme youth (for I took him to be hardly older than Zeinida) this did not seem to be his first love-affair, and I began to hope that out of this adventure I should only reap the lesser of two evils.

“‘Ah, Phlebas!’ Zeinida said to him with emotion ‘what are you doing here?’

“‘What I hoped to do—seeing you’, he answered, throwing himself on his knees: ‘you without whom I cannot live, and who were good enough yesterday to say that you would see me alone.’

“‘Ah!’ she said promptly, ‘do not expect me to

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keep my word! Let us go out; I do not want to stay in this room any longer.'

" 'Zeinida', he pleaded, 'do you grudge me the joy of being alone with you for a while, and can it be that you so soon repent of the first favour you have ever granted me?'

" 'But', she answered with embarrassment, 'can I not speak to you somewhere else, and, if you love me, can you insist upon asking me for something I am reluctant to give?'

" Phlebas, without answering, seized one of her hands and kissed it with as much passion as I could have done. Zeinida looked at him languishingly: she sighed, still affected by the dream which had made her lover out so eager, and herself so frail. More disposed to love by the impression the dream had left, each time her eyes turned towards Phlebas they became softer, and by little and little once more took on that swimmingness which my love had endued them with a short time before.

" In spite of Phlebas's small experience, his affection, which caused him to react to all Zeinida's impulses, made him observe them well enough not to doubt but that she was pleased to see him. Zeinida, moreover, frank and artless, hiding from modesty alone the state into which his presence threw her, thought she was concealing much of her tumultuous condition, whereas she was revealing it all. Phlebas did not know enough to make a conquest of a flirt whose false virtue and parade of decorum would have frightened him away, but he was only too dangerous for Zeinida, who,

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urged onward by her love, did not know, even though she feared to yield, in what manner she could have protected herself.

“Although she saw Phlebas at her knees with great pleasure, she bade him rise. Far from obeying her, he clasped them with so tender an expression, and such lively delight, that Zeinida sighed at it.

“‘Ah, Phlebas!’ she said, much moved, ‘let us go out of here, I beg of you!’

“‘Will you always be afraid of me, Zeinida?’ he asked softly. ‘Ah, Zeinida, how little my love affects you! What can you fear from a lover who adores you, who has almost from birth been subject to your charms, and who since then, moved by them alone, has wanted to live for you only?’ Zeinida’, he added, shedding tears, ‘look what you reduce me to!’

“As he said his last words he raised to her eyes which were full of tears. For a time she gazed at them with a softened look, and yielding at length to the deep feelings which love and the sorrows of Phlebas aroused in her, she said in a voice choked by the tears she tried to crush back:

“‘Oh, cruel one! have I deserved your reproaches? And what proofs can I give you of my love, if, after all those you have had, you still doubt me?’

“‘If you loved me’, he replied, ‘would you not forget yourself with me in this solitude, and, far from wishing to leave it, what other fear would you have than that of being disturbed?’

“‘Alas!’ she answered naïvely, ‘who says I have any other?’

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“Thereupon Phlebas, leaping up from her knees, ran to the door and latched it: on his way back he met Zeinida, who guessing what he was going to do, had risen to prevent him. He took her in his arms, and, in spite of the resistance she offered, placed her back upon me, and sat down close beside her.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

"I do not know whether Zeinida imagined that once a door is latched it is useless to put up any defence, or whether, now she no longer needed to fear detection, she feared herself the more; but no sooner was Phlebas beside her than, with a blush rather for what she feared he might try to do than for what she said, she asked him in a trembling, halting voice, not to ask anything of her, even before he did so. But Zeinida's voice was tender rather than authoritative, and neither vexed nor hindered Phlebas. Stretched beside her, he folded her so fiercely in his arms that Zeinida, even while she began to know how much she had to fear from him, partook of his transports in spite of herself.

"Though very moved, she tried to escape from Phlebas's arms, but she did this so much against the grain that Phlebas did not have to make any great efforts to overcome hers. They gazed at one another for some time without saying anything; but Zeinida, feeling her inward tumult increase, and afraid at last that she would not be able to master it, begged Phlebas, but oh so gently! please to let her be.

" 'Then are you never going to make me happy?' he asked her.

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“ ‘ Ah! ’ she answered, with a lack of balance I have never forgiven her, ‘ you are only too much so, and before you arrived you were still more so. ’ ”

“ The more baffling these words seemed to Phlebas, the more imperative it seemed to him to know what Zeinida meant by them. For a long time he urged her to explain them to him, and, though she was very reluctant to say any more, he urged her so tenderly, with such passionate looks, that at last he ended by shaking her resolve. ”

“ ‘ But if I tell you ’, she said in a trembling voice, ‘ you will take advantage of it. ’ ”

“ He swore he would not, but so mildly that, far from soothing her fears, she must have known that he would break his word. Too far carried away to be able to see this clearly, or too innocent to be aware of the full force of the confidence she was going to entrust him with, after some feeble resistance to his solicitations, she confessed to him that just before he had come in, having fallen asleep, she had seen him in a dream, and with a rapture she had never had a notion of before. ”

“ ‘ Was I in your arms? ’ he asked, clasping her in his. ”

“ ‘ Yes ’, she answered, turning upon him eyes full of trouble. ”

“ ‘ Ah! ’ he continued, in the extreme of emotion, ‘ so you loved me then more than you do now! ’ ”

“ ‘ I could not love you more ’, she replied. ‘ But I was less afraid of saying so. ’ ”

“ ‘ And then? ’ he urged. ”

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“ ‘ Ah, Phlebas ! ’ she cried blushing, ‘ what are you asking me ? You were happier than I wish you ever should be, and were not the less exacting for it. ’

“ On hearing this, Phlebas, no longer able to control his ardour, and emboldened by Zeinida’s confidences, raising himself a little, and bending over her, did all he could to press his lips to hers. Bold as this attempt was, Zeinida would not perhaps have minded, had not Phlebas, intent only upon achieving his own happiness, carried his audacity to such lengths as she thought herself unable to forgive.

“ ‘ Ah, Phlebas ! ’ she cried, ‘ where are your promises, and are you so little afraid of vexing me ? ’

“ Violent as Phlebas’s impulses were, Zeinida protected herself so earnestly, and he saw so much anger in her eyes, that he thought it better no longer to insist upon a conquest that he could not achieve without offending his beloved, and which even, owing to Zeinida’s resistance, he was not sure of succeeding in. At last, either from respect or timidity, he desisted, and, not daring to look at Zeinida, said to her sadly :

“ ‘ No, however cruel you may be, I will no longer lay myself open to your displeasure. If I were more dear to you, you would no doubt be less afraid of making me happy ; but although I may no longer hope to make you feel delight, I shall love you no less tenderly. ’

“ Thereupon he rose from beside her, and rushed from the room. Grievously hurt that Phlebas should leave her, and yet not daring to recall him, she

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remained weeping on the sofa, leaning her head in her hands. Yet, made uneasy by her lover's departure, she was getting up to find out what had become of him, when, brought back by his affection, he returned to the room. The blood swept over her face on seeing him again, and she relapsed back on to me, fetching a profound sigh. He ran to cast himself at her knees, gently took her hand, and not daring to kiss it, bathed it with his tears.

“ ‘ Ah, get up ! ’ Zeinida bade him, without looking at him.

“ ‘ No, Zeinida ’, he said, ‘ I will hear my sentence at your feet ! One single word . . . ! But you are crying ! Ah, Zeinida ! have I made flow those tears ? ’

“ At this Zeinida, cruel maid, squeezed his hand, and bending upon him eyes made only more lovely by their tears, sighed for answer. The emotion writ in her eyes was as plain for Phlebas to read as it was for me.

“ ‘ Heavens ! ’ he cried, embracing her fiercely, ‘ do you really forgive me ? ’

“ Still Zeinida said nothing, but, alas ! Phlebas missed nothing of what she seemed to say, and without questioning Zeinida further, sought at her very mouth the admission she still seemed to withhold from him.

“ In that moment I heard only the sound of stifled sighs. Phlebas had taken possession of that charming mouth where my soul, so short a time before him, had . . . But why do I recall a memory so bitter for me still ? Zeinida had thrown herself into her lover's arms : love, and the relics of modesty which made her

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only the more lovely, shone in her face and her eyes. This first ecstasy lasted a long while. Phlebas and Zeinida, perfectly still, breathing each other's souls, seemed sunk in a lethargy of delight."

"All of which", the Sultan then remarked, "cannot have been very pleasant for you, eh? So why on earth did you go and fall in love when you hadn't got a body? That was inconceivably silly of you, for, come now, to what end could this fancy have led you? You see now, one must use one's common sense sometimes."

"Sire", Amanzei answered, "it was only after my passion had taken a strong hold upon me that I realized how much it was to torture me, and, as usually happens, I began to think too late."

"I am really very upset at your misadventure", the Sultan went on, "for I liked you very well clinging to the lips of the girl you are telling us of. It is really a pity you were disturbed."

"So long as Zeinida resisted Phlebas", Amanzei said, "I was in hopes that nothing could conquer her, and, when I found she was more susceptible, I thought that, checked by the prejudice proper to her years, she would not carry frailty so far as to cause my unhappiness. However, I must admit that when I heard her tell her dream, which I thought had been due to me, and learned from her own lips that the vision of Phlebas was the only one she had seen, and that it was to the influence he had over her senses and not to my raptures that she had owed her delights, I had little hope left of escaping the fate I so much dreaded."

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Yet, less delicately perceptive than I should have been, I consoled myself for Phlebas's good fortune by being certain I would share it with him. Whatever he might have told Zeinida about his passion, and the faith he had always kept towards her, it did not seem to me possible that he should have reached the age of fifteen or sixteen without having gratified some curiosity or other which would prevent him from freeing my soul from the bondage which had so long seemed a harsh one to me, and which at that moment I preferred to the most glorious position a soul could occupy. Miserable as Zeinida's frailty made me, I awaited the consequences with less pain once I had persuaded myself that, whatever might happen, I should not be compelled to leave her.

"Dreadful as was for me the deep lethargy into which they had sunk, and which each sigh they fetched seemed only to increase, it delayed Phlebas's bolder attempts, and, though it showed me how deeply they felt their love, I earnestly prayed Brahma not to let it cease. Useless prayers! I was too guilty for two innocent souls, worthy of their bliss, to be sacrificed for me.

"Phlebas, after languishing for some time upon Zeinida's bosom, urged by fresh desires which the frailty of his lover made more warm, gazed at her with eyes full of the delicious drunkenness of his soul. Zeinida perturbed by Phlebas's glances, turned her own away and sighed.

"'What, you avoid my looks!' he said to her. 'Ah! turn rather your lovely eyes towards

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me, and read in mine all the flame you arouse in me!’

“Then he took her in his arms. Zeinida still tried to evade his transports, but either she did not try to resist long, or, deceiving herself, she thought she was still resisting, and Phlebas was soon gazed upon as lovingly as he could wish.

“Although Zeinida’s uttermost kindness would have thrown her into a soft languor not very different from the one my own ardour had induced in her, and that she looked at Phlebas with all the passion he had required of her, she seemed to repent of having delivered herself too far to her feelings, and tried to withdraw from Phlebas’s arms.

“‘Ah, Zeinida!’ he murmured, ‘in the dream you told me of, you were not afraid to make me happy!’

“‘Alas!’ she replied, ‘however much I may love you, without it, without the pulses it set beating in my veins, you would not have obtained so much!’

“Imagine, Sire, how great my distress was when I learned that my rival’s happiness was due to me alone!

“‘You should be satisfied with your victory’, she continued. ‘And you will offend me if you try to carry it further. I have done more than I ought to convince you of my love, but . . .’

“‘Ah, Zeinida!’ Phlebas interrupted impetuously, ‘if it were true that you loved me you would not be afraid of telling me so, or at least you would tell me so more completely. Instead of only yielding timidly to my love, you would abandon yourself to all my raptures, and even then think you had not done

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enough for me. Come!' he continued, flinging himself beside her with an eagerness which would have killed my soul if a soul could die; 'come, consummate my happiness!'

" 'Ah, Phlebas!' timorous Zeinida cried in a faltering voice, 'do you realize that you are undoing me? Alas, you swore to be so respectful! Phlebas, is this how you show your respect for those whom you love?'

" Not all Zeinida's tears or prayers, commands or threats, had the smallest effect on Phlebas. Although the gauze shift which was between them already enabled him to enjoy only too many of her charms, which his impulsive movements had even now disarranged as much as her sleep had, less contented with the beauties she offered to his gaze than carried away by his desire to see those she still kept secluded from him, he at length removed the veil to which Zeinida's modesty still clung, and throwing himself upon the beauties which his temerity gave to his gaze, he overwhelmed her with such eager and urgent caresses, that he had no strength left to do more than sigh.

" But modesty and love still struggled for the mastery in Zeinida's heart and eyes. The first refused the lover everything, the latter left him nearly nothing to wish for. She durst not let her eyes linger upon Phlebas, for she reciprocated all the transports she aroused in him. She guarded one thing, only to leave a still more essential one unguarded; she wanted, and no longer wanted; she hid one of her beauties to

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reveal another; she repelled him with horror, and drew him towards her with joy. Sometimes prejudice subdued love, and the next moment was sacrificed to it, but with reserves and precautions which, overcome as it had seemed to be, still left it master of the field. Zeinida felt by turns shame at her easiness, and shame at her reluctance. The fear of displeasing Phlebas, the emotions aroused by his raptures, the exhaustion consequent upon so long a struggle, at last compelled her to surrender. Herself a prey to all the desires she had aroused in him, only impatiently bearing with pleasures which exacerbated without satisfying, she sought for the deep delight they pointed to from afar, but did not give her.

“ At this moment, beyond myself with agony at what I saw, and beginning to fear from certain notions of Phlebas which proved to me his lack of experience, that he would expel my soul from a place where, in spite of the grief caused it there, it liked to dwell, I tried to leave Zeinida’s sofa for a moment, and elude the decrees of Brahma. But in vain: the same power which had chosen the place of my exile, frustrated my efforts, and made me await in despair the issue of my destiny.

“ Phlebas . . . Oh, horrible recollection! bitter moment, of which the image will never fade from my mind! Phlebas, intoxicated by his love, and made master, by the tender complaisance of Zeinida, of all the charms that I adored, made ready to complete his happiness. Zeinida surrendered herself swooningly to Phlebas’s raptures, and, if the fresh impediments

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which still trammelled their love delayed it, they did not lessen it. Zeinida's lovely eyes shed tears, her mouth tried to form a protest, and at that moment her love alone prevented her heaving a sigh. Phlebas, the author of so many ills, incurred, however, no hatred for them: Zeinida, of whom Phlebas complained, was only the more tenderly loved. At last, a louder cry she uttered, a more lively joy I saw sparkle in Phlebas's eyes, declared my unhappiness and my freedom: and my soul, filled with its love and its sorrow, went repining on its way to receive from Brahma fresh orders and new shackles."

"What! is that all?" the Sultan asked. "You were a sofa for a mighty short time, or else you saw very little while you were one."

"It would have been tiresome for your Majesty if I had told you all I had seen while I dwelt in sofas", Amanzei answered. "And I have attempted to bring before you only such things as might amuse you, rather than tell you all."

"Even supposing the things you have told us", the Sultana said, "are more amusing than those you have omitted, which I am prepared to believe (since I have no means of comparing them) you must yet be blamed for having brought only a few characters into play whilst all were at your disposal, and for having of your own accord limited a subject which is by nature so extensive."

"No doubt, Madam", Amanzei replied, "I should have been in the wrong had all the characters been equally interesting or remarkable; had I been able

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to consider them all without falling into the sorry state of showing you mean or commonplace people; or had I been able to be prolific on a subject which, however much I might have varied the characters, must have become tiresome by endless repetition of its essential fabric."

"Indeed", the Sultan said, "I believe that if all these things were to be weighed, he might very well be found right; but I would rather have him wrong than bother about it all. Ah, grandmother!" he concluded with a sigh, "not thus, not thus did you tell *your* stories!"